

Theorizing Irony and Trauma in
Magical Realism: Junot Díaz's
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

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Abstract: Magical realism has been commonly theorized in terms of a postcolonial strategy of cultural renewal, according to which such fiction is understood as embodying a racialized epistemology allegedly inclusive of magic. The inherent exoticism of this idea has drawn criticism. Critics have recently begun to re-envision magical realism in terms of trauma theory. However, trauma readings of magical realism tend to unselfconsciously reinvigorate an authenticating rhetoric: magical realism is represented not as the organic expression of a precolonial or hybrid consciousness, but of colonial or other kinds of trauma. Through case studies of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, this essay intervenes in trauma studies readings of magical realist literature to emphasize the fundamentally ironic nature of the iconic narrative strategy of representing the ostentatiously fantastical as real. It also argues that these texts, while invested in representing the traumas of colonialism, are less interested in authenticating magic as part of a postcolonial or traumatic epistemology than in transforming fantasy into history and empowered futurity.

Keywords: magical realism, postcolonialism, trauma, Junot Díaz, Alexis Wright

I. Introduction

This essay begins from the minority theoretical position that magical realism's iconic narrative strategy of representing the fantastical as real is ironic. Magical realist texts narrate the patently untrue as though it is perfectly true—a textbook definition of irony. For example, in Gabriel García Márquez's paradigmatic magical realist novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, we read how news of José Arcadio's murder travels to his mother Úrsula:

a trickle of blood came out under the door, crossed the living room, went out into the street, continued in a straight line across the uneven footpaths, descended steps, climbed curbs, passed along the Street of the Turks, turned a corner to the right and another to the left, made a right angle in front of the Buendía house, went in under the closed door, crossed the sitting room, staying close to the walls so as not to stain the rugs, continued on to the other living room, made a wide curve to avoid the dining room table, advanced along the porch with the begonias and passed without being seen under the chair of Amaranta, who was giving an arithmetic lesson to Aureliano José, and made its way through the pantry and appeared in the kitchen, where Úrsula was preparing to crack thirty-six eggs to make bread. (232–33; my translation)

It is difficult to miss the irony in this passage. In fact, the passage fulfills the five potential cues of irony identified by Linda Hutcheon in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*: a change of register, exaggeration or understatement, contradiction or incongruity, literalization or simplification, and repetition or echoic mention (156). A change of register occurs as the terrible trickle of blood from the deceased begins its ridiculous journey; there is clear exaggeration; the blood's supernatural motion is obviously incongruous with the natural pooling pattern of blood; the “homing” bloodline can be read as a literalization of the recursive nature of imperialist trauma (the key concern of the novel, as I will suggest shortly); and repetition is evident in the prolonged description of the blood's trajectory. The passage, in Hutcheon's terms,

therefore allows the “said” to “brush up against some unsaid” (154). It brings about irony’s dialectical uncertainty, or what Hutcheon describes as irony’s “edge” (39).

Irony is a common characteristic of magical realist texts which, as Anne Hegerfeldt argues in *Lies that Tell the Truth*, “insinuate that the reader might be having his or her leg pulled” (112). This is not to say that the magical realist novel, like the “tall tale” with which Hegerfeldt compares it (112), is comic in intention. While the ironic depiction of the supernatural can generate humour, as the above example from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* demonstrates, it also typically constitutes a pointed and provocative affront to complacency—something encapsulated in Hutcheon’s notion of irony’s edge. Indeed, I argue that the irony in a magical realist novel demands a critical reengagement with history as essential to reimagining futurity.

Irony, as Claire Colebrook contends, is a renowned “satirical and debunking technique” that highlights the difficulty of securing “the sincerity and authenticity of speech” (78, 2). In magical realist fiction, ironically narrated supernatural events announce a discursive crisis around truth. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance, a deluge lasting “four years, eleven months and two days” (García Márquez 431) follows the repressed massacre of thousands of striking banana-plantation workers—an omission in the historical record of neocolonial Colombia that is central to the novel and lies behind many of the ironically narrated fantastical events. Before the massacre, Remedios the Beautiful, “the most lucid being” in the Buendía family and “the only one who remained immune to the banana plague” ascends into the heavens as she folds sheets (347, 340). These Biblically resonant episodes suggest that the truth of the past has been spectacularly erased by neocolonial powers, as if by the hand of God.

The supernatural is thus narrated in ironic ways designed to call attention to a compromised neocolonial history and contribute to the construction of an uncompromised postcolonial future, but the enchantment in magical realist texts has proven distracting. Notwithstanding Hegerfeldt’s recognition of the irony of magical realist narrative, which notably focuses on British case studies (including Angela Carter’s work),

the mode has more commonly been theorized as an authentic form of ethnographic representation. From Alejo Carpentier's 1949 theory of "the *marvellous real*" (119; emphasis in original) of Latin America through to Wendy Faris' 2013 essay on the "shamanistic" (155), magical realist literature has been repeatedly explained in terms of a racialized epistemology allegedly inclusive of real magic. Following in this tradition, Jesus Benito, Ana Manzanás, and Begoña Simal argue that "the full effect of a magical realist text depends on the faithful representation of a reality that admits no doubt" (77). They suggest that magical realism's rejection of "the artificial distinction between what is empirically verifiable and what is not" emerges from societies in which "a manifestly magical and multidimensional reality does permeate the everyday experience" (Benito, Manzanás, and Simal 44, 112).

Such earnestness seems appropriate for a sober context: postcolonial projects of cultural regeneration. However, an anthropological vision of magical realism is rarely supportable. As Marisa Bortolussi argues in a seldom-cited essay dedicated to advancing a "new, more rigorous . . . theory of magic realism" notably founded on irony (281), supernatural events in magical realist novels cannot be consistently attributed to any mythological system and are typically represented in ways that are "playfully self-conscious and intended to make us resist any facile interpretation based on referential reality" (359).

In fact, magical realist literature often condemns the fantastic. The isolated characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* perish in the *mise en abyme* of Melquiádes' fantastical story because they cannot break away from the lies of their colonial past to forge a postcolonial future. Similarly, in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, spirit-child Azaro and his father fight epic battles against the spirit world, which functions as a metonym for the corrupt world of neocolonial politics in Nigeria, in order to return to a historical reality in which they might achieve a postcolonial future. Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* replaces the trivial and superstitious narrative of Clara with the political and engaged narrative of Alba, who fights to "rescue the past" as Augusto Pinochet rewrites history "with a stroke of the pen . . . erasing incidents, ideologies, and historical figures of which the regime disapproved" (Allende 452,

402). As Molly Monet-Viera claims, *The House of the Spirits*, contrary to popular perception, “really represents magic as a frivolous and futile mode that isolates Clara and prevents her from understanding the reality of her own country and not as a mode that represents the truth of Latin American reality in the way, for example, that Carpentier posits it” (99). Magical realist literature typically turns against its own fantastical elements rather than authenticating them.

As I argue at length in *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground*, an ethnographic theory of magical realism as a kind of “marginal realism” misrepresents the form and is politically unhelpful. As Alfred Lopez suggests, it interprets “for a mostly Western readership . . . the Other-as-travelogue” (144) and reiterates “an entire history of colonial and neocolonial desire” (150). Indeed, in response to the inherent exoticism of racialized readings of magical realism and the pressure experienced by Latin American authors from this paradigm, Chilean writers Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez transformed García Márquez’s Macondo into McOndo, editing an anthology of that name that emphasizes the globalized cities and modern lives of contemporary Latin American writers. Their concerns resonate with the criticisms of Michael Valdez Moses, who argues that writers of magical realism are little more than fakes: they are “cosmopolitan sophisticates” who do not believe in the magical events they depict as real (132). However, “magical realists, like all successful professional magicians, understand that the popular appeal of their magic acts would be compromised if they were openly to reveal the secrets of their trade” (132).

Moving away from an ethnographic context, critics have recently theorized magical realist literature in terms of trauma studies, which identifies “*impossibility*” (Caruth, “Introduction: I” 10; emphasis in original) and “*incomprehensibility*” (Caruth, “Introduction: 2” 153; emphasis in original) as defining elements of the traumatic experience. In *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction*, Eugene Arva contends that “the magic in magical realism . . . confers on images an aura of irreality that may actually come the closest to the elusiveness of an actual shock chronotope” (43–44). He defines the latter as “time-spaces marked by events whose violence has

rendered them resistant to rationalization and adequate representation” (26). Such chronotopes include colonial histories as well as other extreme events such as the Holocaust. Begoña Simal-González is optimistic that trauma readings might contribute to “deanchoring magical realism from a specific locale or ethnic enclave” and releasing texts from problematic anthropological readings (135). The potential certainly exists. However, I argue that theorizations of magical realist fiction vis-à-vis trauma tend to unselfconsciously reinvigorate an authenticating rhetoric. Interpreted through this theoretical lens, magical realism is understood not as a genuine expression of a postcolonial or precolonial consciousness, but as the true expression of trauma in colonial or other contexts.

Indeed, some contemporary authors have justified their magical realist literature according to a trauma paradigm, just as writers previously verified their magical realist novels in relation to what Eric Camayd-Frexias describes as “the conventional text of archaic society” (416). Carpentier published his seminal magical realist text *The Kingdom of This World* with a prologue in which he authorized his magical realist novel in relation to African-Haitian myths, thereby establishing magical realism’s credentials as an “alternate verisimilitude” (416). Toni Morrison suggested that her magical realist novel *Song of Solomon*, which features a flying man, represents the “cosmology” of an African-American community that “accepted . . . magic” (342). Similarly, Tim O’Brien, whose *Going After Cacciato* depicts fantastical episodes alongside the traumatic events of the Vietnam War, defends himself as “a realist in the strictest sense” (qtd. in Herzog 80). It is an argument accepted by Arva, who focuses on O’Brien in his theoretical work on magical-realist trauma narratives and whose interpretation of magical realism this essay challenges.

This essay intervenes in trauma studies readings of magical realist fiction to emphasise the fundamentally ironic nature of magical realist narrative, beginning with an analysis of Arva’s trauma reading of magical realist fiction. My intention is certainly not to contest magical realism’s investment in representing trauma. My goal, rather, is to dispute the implication that magical realism authenticates fantasy and is thus an unproductive embodiment of pathology.

As I will establish through case studies of Dominican American Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Aboriginal Australian Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, magical realist fiction is less interested in authenticating fantasy as part of a postcolonial or traumatic epistemology than in ironically allegorizing the ways in which fantasy impinges upon our experience of history in problematic ways. This is true whether the cause is imperialist fabrication (as emphasized in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) or traumatized disassociation (as accentuated in *Going After Cacciato*). This essay also argues that magical realist texts, far from verifying fantasy as evidence of cultural difference or pathology, advocate a self-conscious commitment to history as the key to an empowered future. This trajectory is consistent—perhaps unintuitively—with the destabilizing work of irony. As Colebrook writes, “[w]e can only read texts ironically, seeing the tensions and relations between what is said and not-said, what is and is not the case, if we commit ourselves to a sense and truth towards which speech and language strive” (177). Ironic magical realist texts, while highlighting dialectical uncertainty in a post-modern fashion, nevertheless pursue the truth of the past—and the transformation of the future—as their essential, if elusive, endpoints.

II. Theorizing Trauma and Magical Realism

Theoretical understandings of trauma fundamentally propose that traumatic memories are characterized by irrational strength and confusion. In *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, Cathy Caruth argues that this is because of “the force” of trauma’s “*affront to understanding*” (“Introduction: II” 154; emphasis in original). She argues that “in trauma *the greatest confrontation with reality* may also occur as an absolute numbing to it” and, as a consequence, “*immediacy*, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (“Introduction: I” 6; emphasis in original). The belated recall of the trauma “carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely . . . in the collapse of its understanding” (7). The original trauma, in other words, inspires cognitive disassociation; the extreme experience is too overwhelming to be cogently or coherently perceived at the time. The recollection of it

then returns in a way marked by that disassociation or incompleteness, as well as by its irrational “force” or intensity. The trauma is relived in a repetitious and powerful way in the present, but the past cannot be resolved. “What returns to haunt the victim,” Caruth argues, “is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6).

When it comes to representing trauma, Caruth contends that an authentic account will include the experience’s repression and unavailability. It will, like the “flashback or traumatic reenactment,” convey “not only . . . brutal facts, but also . . . the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension”; it will communicate “both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*” (“Introduction: II” 153; emphasis in original). Such a view of representation challenges testimony’s reliance on facticity and the apparatus of realism. Indeed, Caruth advocates “new ways of listening and recognizing the truth of memories that would, under traditional criteria, be considered to be false” (“Preface” viii). This creates the context for Caruth’s revision of what might be expected of both personal testimony and history. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth writes that trauma shows how history is not “straightforwardly referential” (11) and calls for “a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5). She argues that, “[t]hrough the notion of trauma[,] . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not” (11; emphasis in original). Thus Caruth issues a profound challenge to the realist forms traditionally authorized as appropriate tools for depicting the remembered past and, indeed, opens a space for the privileging of experimental forms of representation when it comes to conveying trauma—a space that Arva exploits in his theorization of magical realism as a trauma literature.

However, Caruth’s particular understanding of trauma and the authentic possibilities for its representation have been contested. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra takes issue with Caruth’s characterization of traumatic experience, which he suggests succumbs

to the temptation to “sacralize trauma or to convert it into a founding or sublime event—a traumatic sublime or transfigured moment of blank insight and revelatory abjection that helps to create a compelling, even disabling sense of betrayal if one departs from a ‘fidelity’ to it” (123). Caruth’s vision of the incomprehensible nature of trauma and its organic representation is indeed vulnerable to being understood as fetishizing and prescriptive. Against Caruth’s apparent desire to preserve trauma’s transcendent origins in portrayals of it, LaCapra argues for self-consciousness and narrative’s potentially reconstructive role in assisting a victim “to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures” (122). Trauma, for LaCapra, does not need to remain true to itself; it does not need to remain authentic—which might be understood as another word for pathological. Trauma does not need to be maintained as something unknown and unassimilated. It can be transformed by confronting and re-envisioning the past in ways directed to futurity. Indeed, I argue that such transformation, oriented towards both the past and the future, can be found in magical realist texts.

It is Caruth’s arguably fetishizing theory of trauma, though, that seems to have influenced Arva’s work in theorizing magical realist literature as a form of trauma narrative. His emphasis on the authentic is consistent with the ways in which the self-conscious and ironic nature of magical realist fiction, as noted, has been historically neglected in favour of an anthropological version of the mode. Arva envisions magical realist literature as intrinsically linked to trauma. He describes an organic relationship in which the traumatic “*modus operandi* straddling two realities”—the remembered and unremembered, the known and unknown—informs the “seemingly impossible intrinsic dichotomy” that allegedly characterizes magical realist texts (44; emphasis in original). For Arva, magical realism’s achievement is “remember[ing] forgetfully” (53)—a phrase that recalls Caruth’s position—in a way that captures “the acuteness of feeling and the painful quality of the traumatic experience” (58).

Arva’s focus is on what he believes is magical realism’s unique embodiment of the affective reality of traumatic experience. Magical realism’s

contamination of realism with fantasy, he argues, “captures the *feel* of a limit experience, not the facts” (4; emphasis in original); the supernatural carries the force of that which “cannot . . . be assimilated” (3). Thus the magical realist text is “capable of bringing the pain and horror home into the readers’ affective world” so that “while it might not . . . explain the unspeakable . . . it can certainly make it felt and re-experienced in a vicarious way” (9). Arva thus conceives of magical realist fiction as preserving the essence of the original traumatic event and as akin to the sublime trauma narrative that Caruth advocates. In fact, Arva explicitly argues that “magical realism writes the silence that trauma keeps referring to, and converts it into history” (23). He insists, like Caruth, that “the relationship between the real and the imaginary is not the same as the one between truth and untruth” (Arva 75) and states that magical realism is “unreal but true” (112). It is a new kind of realism.

It is unsurprising that Arva focuses on O’Brien’s magical realist texts as one of his primary examples, given how O’Brien, as I indicate above, self-consciously articulates his creative practice in terms of his traumatic experience. O’Brien’s fiction often metafictionally frames its characteristic repetitiveness and unreliability as symptoms of his war trauma and evidence of his narrative’s authenticity. In *The Things They Carried*, a book of short stories based on O’Brien’s experience in Vietnam, the narrator explains: “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen . . . there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (67–68; emphasis in original). Following O’Brien’s lead, Arva argues that the “extreme nature of the events that characterize a war chronotope can easily blur the lines between dream and reality” and that O’Brien’s fantasy-infused narratives “convey the felt reality of war” (277).

O’Brien’s magical realist literature might indeed mimic the confusion and irrationality of traumatic experience. However, his representation of the magical as real relies on a fundamental irony—the narration of something self-consciously untrue as true—to achieve its effect and is hardly intended to inspire faith. In *Going After Cacciato*, narrator Paul Berlin engages in an elaborate fantasy about deserting the war as he chases after

the absconding Cacciato. Berlin—and the elusive Cacciato—appear to make it all the way from Vietnam to Paris, but O'Brien portrays the great escape as unreliable. At one point in the journey, Berlin falls into a seemingly bottomless hole on the road to Paris, along with three refugees and their water buffalo and cart: "[D]own and down, pinwheeling freestyle through the dark" or "up and up, it was impossible to know" (O'Brien, *Going* 82, 99). The episode, resonant of Alice's fall into wonderland or Dorothy's spiral into Oz, invites interpretation. While one might read it in terms of the dissociative symptoms of trauma, the event also strongly evokes the historical maelstrom of the Vietnam War. It is surely ironic and pointed that a character named Berlin escapes to Paris during the Vietnam War. Berlin is a city notorious for the kinds of ideological divisions allegedly driving the conflict (rendered physical, of course, by the Berlin Wall). However, Paul Berlin finds himself being led towards France, which draws attention to the pre-war colonial power in Vietnam as well as the United States' neocolonial role in the war.

Arva's authenticating reading of magical realist literature, like its ethnographic counterparts, relies on a definition of the narrative mode that resolves the irony generated by representations of the fantastical as historical. Building on Amaryll Chanady's influential definition of magical realist fiction as a form of fantasy that "eliminates the antinomy between the real and the supernatural" (*Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 36)—which she later rejected ("Magic Realism Revisited")—Arva argues that "the magical realist text shows no clear demarcation between its two ontological levels" (102). He writes: "[I]ts extraordinary elements are presented in a deceptively matter-of-fact way . . . which ultimately prompts readers to accept them as parts of their rational universe" (Arva 112). He suggests that when magical events occur, "readers feel prompted to move on without batting an eyelid" (182). His definition resonates strongly with the culturally authenticating visions of magical realism canvassed earlier in this paper.

In addition to being untrue of magical realist texts such as O'Brien's, as I have shown, such a view of magical realism profoundly neutralizes the ironic charge of these texts. It deactivates the provocative representation of the obviously untrue as true and removes the need to interpret

that conspicuous narrative strategy. Indeed, for Arva there is no pressing need to interpret magical realist texts. Regarding Remedios the Beauty's levitation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance, Arva claims that "more important than causes is the *fact* that the law of gravitation, just as any other physical law for that matter, is breakable" (184; emphasis in original). He also reads García Márquez's depiction of the historical massacre of the plantation workers in terms of "the confusion of an extreme event that will be remembered but never understood" (Arva 193). As I note above, the text does not support such resignation to the uncertainties of a traumatic and repressed history. In fact, a retreat into fantasy is shown as responsible for the characters' annihilation from history.

For Arva, magical realism is what might be called a traumatic realism in the way that, for Carpentier before him, magical realism embodied a kind of Latin American realism. Arva explicitly compares his theorization of magical realism, as the organic expression of the irrational effects of trauma, with Carpentier's understanding of the form as the inherent expression of the Latin American marvellous real. Arva argues that Latin America—where magical realist fiction found prominence—is defined by trauma: "colonial inheritance, brutal military regimes, failed revolutions, and economic disasters" (98). Carpentier, Arva contends, invented a "language" in magical realism that responded to the "felt" experience of a "reality either too beautiful or too terrifying—or, at times, mysteriously both—to be reflected in a traditional 'realistic' type of narrative" (119). Arva does not territorialize trauma and magical realism in the way that Carpentier appropriates marvellous and magical realist literature exclusively for Latin America. In Arva's view, magical realist trauma narratives can be written by authors across the world. Indeed, because Arva argues that traumatization is the "*cause*" of magical realism (3; emphasis in original)—and because magical realist novels are very rarely first-person testimonies—he must extend the experience of trauma beyond "firsthand witnessing" to "vicarious traumatization and transgenerational trauma" (2, 1). Committed to his organic theory of magical realism, Arva authenticates the magical realist narratives of those who have not directly experienced trauma—just as Carpentier authen-

ticated the magical realist narratives of “white” Latin Americans, such as himself, who could claim neither “black” nor indigenous ancestry.

To reiterate, the problem for this essay is not the idea that trauma might inform magical realist fiction, but that it has to do so authentically—that magical realism has to be, as Arva represents it, a symptom. According to Arva, “traumatized (or vicariously traumatized) authors compulsively and constantly strive to find a voice . . . capable of expressing what is too terrifying to express, that horrible event which resists witnessing” (45). However, magical realist literature is not some kind of naïve and spontaneous outpouring of traumatic emotion. It is, like other forms of literature, a creative and transformative practice that occurs within a transnational and commercial field of publication and influence. It is also the case, as I have suggested, that magical realist texts do not sacralize the fantastic as a metonym of the traumatic unknown in the way that Arva desires. Rather, they ironize and even condemn the kinds of dissimulations and distortions that obscure the material and political reality of the traumatic past and its occluded role in the traumatic present. That history, magical realist texts suggest—in the manner of a psychoanalytic “cure” that requires a patient to come to terms with the past—must be confronted in order for a productive future to be imagined.

III. Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, like other magical realist texts ranging from García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, provides a highly ironic narrative about colonial (or neocolonial) trauma in which a realistic representation of the outrageously fantastical draws attention to historical obfuscation or denial. Díaz’s novel ostensibly focuses on the life story of the unfortunate American-Dominican Oscar de León, or “Wao,” who escapes into a world of literary fantasy and is tormented by his peers for being different. However, the story exposes a family history of intergenerational trauma, the roots of which lie in the legacy of Spanish colonialism and continuing US neo-imperialism in the Dominican Republic (much of which is revealed in satirical footnotes.)

The first page of this magical realist novel, which is flamboyantly narrated by Oscar's best friend Yunior, introduces a supernatural image to embody the colonial history and repressed trauma of the diasporic de León family. It is the legend of the "*fukú*," a curse for which Columbus was the "midwife" and which "was the death bane of the Taínos" (Díaz 1). The Taínos were the original inhabitants of Santo Domingo, the Caribbean island first colonized by Columbus and later divided into the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Their population was decimated following the Spanish invasion. This curse was also "carried in the screams of the enslaved," the Africans brought to work on the sugar plantations following the "First Genocide" of the Taíno (220). Describing Columbus's Santo Domingo as "the Ground Zero of the New World" (1), the novel, as Alberto Galindo suggests, evokes the modern atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki committed by the US, which consolidated its neo-imperialist role as a global superpower during the Second World War (Galindo 84). The phrase also alludes to the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. However, in the world depicted in Díaz's novel, the *fukú* is associated most explicitly with Rafael Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic, which endured from 1930 to 1961 and which Yunior bluntly describes as "the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere" (Díaz 3). Unlike Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and 9/11, that devastating dictatorship has never been formally commemorated or mourned; certainly the Dominicans in Díaz's novel maintain a traumatized silence about it.

Yunior's narrative progressively unearths the story of the persecution of Oscar's family under Trujillo's brutal regime. Oscar's grandfather, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral, was imprisoned for frustrating the rapacious Trujillo's sexual desire for his daughter. Soon after, Dr. Abelard, his wife, and two of their daughters are killed. A third daughter, Beli (who later gives birth to Oscar), is assaulted in the sugarcane fields—where slaves were raped and beaten during the colonial era—before being sent to the US by her resourceful grandmother, known as La Inca. Oscar is ultimately beaten to death in the same fields by order of a henchman of the "Demon Balaguer" (305), Trujillo's successor, who is also supported by the US.

As Ramón Saldívar writes, Díaz's novel does not allow readers "to bracket the tyranny by seeing it as a product of distant Third World perversities" (13). The text repeatedly emphasizes the relationship between the suffering in the Dominican Republic and the modern comforts of the US. Oscar's murderer, "the capitán," has US citizenship and "even First World teeth" (Díaz 306). He spends every Christmas in Queens, bringing "his cousins bottles of Johnnie Walker Black" (306). The capitán had "supported the U.S. invaders, and because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists, he was launched—no vaulted—into the top ranks of the military police" (305). The invasion in question, which allegedly involved "democratization" (5), occurred on 28 April 1965. Yuniór sardonically observes: "Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq" (4).

As Dixá Ramirez documents, Trujillo was known by Dominicans as *el chivo*, or the goat, conceived of as a "demon-like, pagan figure," and sometimes associated with Satan (397). Yuniór prefers to hyperbolically describe Trujillo in terms of the fantasy literature of which Oscar is a fan. Trujillo is compared to Sauron, the satanic figure in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, or the DC Comics villain Darkseid. According to Ramirez's reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which resonates with Arva's interpretation of magical realism, Díaz's narrative explores how "the language of the occult . . . is the traumatized community's way of safely knowing what trauma has rendered unknown" (Ramirez 385). However, Díaz's text is hardly content with the occult "language" of fantasy literature or of the *fukú*, both of which the novel treats with irreverence. The effects are subversive. As Daniel Bautista argues, the strategy of comparing Trujillo to Darkseid "gives us a good sense of the dictator's destructive efficiency. Yet the comparison also diminishes Trujillo at the same time by casting him as a mere comic book character" (47). Moreover, the comparison "simultaneously pokes fun at widespread Dominican beliefs about the seemingly supernatural extent of the dictator's power" (47). Díaz's novel, in ways consistent with other ironic magical realist texts, is not engaged in some kind of ethnographic validation of fantasy.

When it comes to the *fukú*, Yúnior dismisses it as “our parents’ shit” (Díaz 194), while Oscar’s sister Lola sensibly adds that life is “enough” (205). Further undercutting the supernatural, Oscar finally puts aside his desire to become a Dominican Tolkien to become a family historiographer of sorts. This occurs following his first, non-fatal beating by the capitán’s thugs in the sugarcane fields. During the beating Oscar hopes to be rescued by US Marines but instead experiences a vision of a “dude” with “no face” sitting complacently on a porch (309). As Anne Garland Mahler writes, each of Oscar’s family members has a similar vision during their own horrific assaults, with the faceless oppressor subtly but insistently associated with the US (122–23). During his recovery in Miami, Oscar has another vision of a blank book, which resonates with the blank face of the mysterious bystander and which, as Garland Maher argues, “connotes . . . failure to condemn the tyrannical forces that have cursed Oscar’s family and Dominicans in general” (131). Oscar, soon after regaining consciousness, proclaims “*fuck you*” to the *fukú* (Díaz 315)—a declaration that Garland Mahler describes as Oscar’s “first act of anticolonial writing” (131)—and returns to the Dominican Republic to confront his family’s experience of violence and oppression.

As Brygida Gasztold argues, “a curse may be an excuse which frees one from personal responsibility, at the same time enhancing a miserable life by lifting it up from the mundane. Finally, a curse also gives hope that one day it will be lifted, and a new, happy life will start” (212). Díaz’s novel, however, advocates agency rather than passivity in the face of an evil that it insists must be identified rather than mythologized, confronted rather than avoided. In an interview with Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, Díaz described Trujillo’s traumatic legacy as “colossal” and as generating the kind of post-traumatic effects in his family and the wider diasporic Dominican-American community that “last to the point where . . . the person no longer has contact with the origins of that evil, that trauma” (203). The lesson of Díaz’s novel is that the intergenerational trauma of colonialism has an origin, a history, even if it seems hidden and supernatural. As Max Abrams argues, while the *fukú* “can be seen as . . . an explanation to rationalize the horrors visited on colonized people,” Díaz’s novel reminds us that those horrors “came

from somewhere and one must trace back to their origins in order to obtain full understanding” (14).

Garland Maher, citing Walter Mignolo’s description of colonialism as “the hidden face of modernity and its very condition of possibility” (Mignolo qtd. in Garland Maher 124), suggests that Díaz’s novel exposes this hidden face. When Oscar begins to write on the unscripted book of his family’s and nation’s history, he is inscribing “one of history’s blankest pages of impunity” (Garland Maher 132). However, Oscar’s book, which he believes will be “the cure to what ails us” (Díaz 343), mysteriously disappears after his murder. It is Yuniór’s account of Oscar’s quest—Díaz’s novel—that is offered as a “*zafa*” (7), or counterspell, to the *fukú* of colonialism.

The novel also self-consciously insists that the *zafa*’s origins are in “Macondo” rather than “McOndo” (7), thus upholding the original strategy of García Márquez’s paradigmatic magical realist text to contest the lies of imperialist histories. Hanna Monica argues that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is initially the portrait of “successive generations, ignorant of the history of . . . ancestors, . . . doomed to re-live the violence and evil wrought by the family’s curse” (500). However, “Yuniór’s story explicitly explores the need . . . to break the cycle of tyranny by reinserting memory against historical forgetting” (Monica 505). Both novels suggest that reengaging with history is “a way to protect against the *fukú* that works through silencing and ignorance” (516).

Such a reading contrasts with Arva’s theory of magical realism as a form of fiction that organically and unproductively embodies its traumatic “*cause*” (3; emphasis in original). Notably, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’s irony and self-consciousness have been construed as evidence that Díaz’s text is not a true example of magical realism—once again affirming magical realism’s longstanding association with authenticity. Bautista, for example, argues that the novel’s “ironic and irreverent tone” (46) differentiates it from García Márquez’s allegedly mythologically invested *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Bautista describes Díaz’s novel as an example of what he calls “post-magical realist” fiction (52), while Saldívar describes it not only as an instance of “post-

magical realist” (1) but also “post-race” (14) literature. By contrast—but offering further evidence for the ways in which magical realism continues to be powerfully bound to authenticity and ethnicity—Tim Lanzendorfer interprets *Oscar Wao* as revitalizing “the truly marvelous nature of the Caribbean almost completely forgotten in an increasingly secular Dominican diaspora” (127).

However, as I have established, magical realist literature is a fundamentally ironic form of writing that narrates the magical as real in order to highlight and critique obfuscation of the profound traumas of colonialism. Magical realist novels suggest that it is only through historical knowledge that the future can be liberated from the past. Significantly, towards the end of *Oscar Wao*, Yunior not only mourns Oscar but also anticipates the day when he will teach Lola’s daughter about her family history: “[S]he’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (Díaz 341). The narrative also concludes with Oscar’s last written words—“The beauty! The beauty!” (345)—which are inspired by love rather than fear and powerfully transform Joseph Conrad’s traumatic vision of colonialism.

IV. Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*

Wright’s *The Swan Book* is another ironic magical realist novel that announces an interest in the future in a way that might at first seem more consistent with the genre of science fiction than magical realism.² While *Oscar Wao* engages with examples of the futuristic genre of science fiction in the form of literature and comic books, *The Swan Book* employs the science-fiction generic convention of a futuristic setting. It portrays a vision of Australia three centuries after the colonial invasion of 1788. Climate change has wreaked havoc on ecosystems, and climate refugees from all over the world have been confined alongside Aborigines on the shores of a desert swamp, where “the local owners soon realised that their homeland was really a secret locality for [the] Defence Force” (Wright 12). The military uses the place as a dump for unwanted international asylum seekers or “Boat People” (56)—a scenario that evokes Australia’s notoriously hostile policies toward asylum seekers. Aborigines from other areas, comically called “truck people” (52), are also brought in

and left there, along with the detritus of military operations, including ships. The rusting hulks of these ships, with their “abandoned steel, planks of timber, brass lanterns and fittings,” and “ghost sailors” (9), poetically evoke the “First Fleet” of the British colonizers of Australia. The implication is ironic but also clear: from an Aboriginal perspective, white Australians are the original unwanted “Boat People.” Indeed, as the novel explicitly puts it—turning back on white Australia its fear about asylum seekers being terrorists, while evoking a wider history of British colonialism—“the rotting boats dotting the lake had belonged to an army of textbook terrorists who invaded other countries” (60).

Despite its speculative scenario, Wright’s narrative thus demonstrates the ironic engagement with imperialist histories characteristic of magical realist literature. In fact, the futuristic setting at the tercentenary of invasion paradoxically calls attention to the past—what Díaz might call the “Ground Zero” of Australian colonialism. Wright’s novel, like Díaz’s, is also specifically interested in the occluded and enduring traumas of imperialism, although it is important to note that the colonial contexts of their work are quite different. While Díaz’s novel references the original trauma of Spanish colonialism on the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, his concern is ultimately with traumas incurred in the twentieth century by a non-indigenous population as a result of US neo-imperialism. Wright’s novel, by contrast, focuses on the traumas of Australia’s First Nations peoples in relation to colonial and neo-colonial dispossession. Her vision of colonial trauma is both vast and personal, incorporating environmental devastation—with the white colonizer having decided to sacrifice “the whole Earth” to himself as if he was “the new face of God” (Wright 12)—and the intimate suffering of Aboriginal children. As Honni Van Rijswijk writes, *The Swan Book* is “a story of relentless, interconnected harms.”

The central protagonist of Wright’s novel is Oblivia Ethylene, a traumatized Aboriginal girl who has been raped by a gang of Aboriginal youths “wracked out of their minds on fumes from an endless supply of petrol” (Wright 83). Oblivia has been “gang raped physically, emotionally, statistically, randomly, historically, so fully in fact: “[Her] *time stands still*” (82; emphasis in original). In this way Wright signals how the as-

sault on Oblivia is part of a larger history of damage done to Aboriginal people, who were dispossessed of their land; killed by European diseases; murdered, raped, and dismembered; subjected to scientific scrutiny; deprived of their children; confined to various institutions, prisons, and missions; used for slave labour; and forced to assimilate. “It’s not that shit happens,” the narrative pointedly advises, employing an Australian colloquialism that embodies a dismissal of causality, “it’s the eternal reality of a legacy in brokenness that was the problem” (86). The list of violent acts endured by Oblivia, which ends with the phrase “*Your time stands still*,” makes clear the connection between traumatic pasts and stalled futures.

As in Díaz’s novel of colonial trauma, which portrays how Dominicans repress their painful pasts, the characters in *The Swan Book* would prefer to forget Oblivia’s suffering, which is described in terms of “the cause and effect of an outrageous history that had created a destiny” (Wright 83). Oblivia wants only “to avoid speaking of a shame that was so overwhelmingly connected to the girl’s experience of life” (83). Similarly, the Aboriginal people of the swamp give up on searching for Oblivia when she goes missing because “*the only thing discovered was shame*” (85; emphasis in original). While Oblivia’s chemical surname highlights the parallel between the destruction of a people and the destruction of their land, her first name also draws attention to the temptation of historical forgetting.

It is an oblivion encouraged by European Australians. Following her assault by the intoxicated Aboriginal boys, Oblivia is discovered, cowering in the root system of a tree, by a European climate-refugee known as Bella Donna of the Champions. Named after a poisonous plant, Bella Donna proves duly destructive. She takes Oblivia to live with her in the wreck of an army ship on the swamp, where the woman’s “aim in life was to get the girl to act normal: behave and sit up straight at the table and use a knife and fork properly, learn table manners, talk nicely, walk as a butterfly flies, dress like a normal person, learn something marvelous on a daily basis, and show some resilience” (21). Bella Donna not only heroically “discovers” Oblivia, just as white Australians are said to have discovered their continent, but also sets about saving her from her

people's ways in a manner that ironically resonates with the treatment of Aboriginal people throughout Australia's colonial history.

The novel's plot recalls a recent episode in Australia's colonial history known as the Northern Territory National Emergency Response or, more colloquially, the Intervention. In 2007 a national emergency was declared in relation to alleged child sex abuse in the Northern Territory, and the Australian government sent armed forces to take control of seventy-three Aboriginal communities. The episode lies at the heart of Wright's magical realist narrative, just as exposing the massacre of striking plantation workers provides the focal point for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While it emerged that the sexual abuse had been exaggerated, the Intervention—and the fundamental violation of human rights it represented—continued under a successive government. Melinda Hinkson states that the Intervention was marked by two elements: “the severing of the ‘crisis’ from any consideration of past governmental action and neglect” and “the refusal to take into account . . . the views of Aboriginal people themselves” (6). It thus represented a denial of colonial history—even as it embodied and continued that very history—and a denial of Aboriginal sovereignty.

Van Rijswijk argues that the figure of the endangered Aboriginal child is a trope that has proven “central to the state's control of Aboriginal people”; the so-called Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children were removed from their parents earlier in the twentieth century under the pretext of that motif. As Van Rijswijk contends, Wright's narrative pointedly re-envisioned the abused child “by connecting the harm of sexual violence to the harms of economic inequality, environmental damage and the denial of indigenous sovereignty.” The novel also satirizes the ideology of the Intervention, which Bella Donna symbolizes. In fact, the novel speculates that Bella Donna is a spy working for the army (37), which has been “sent by the Government in Canberra to save babies from their parents” and is “guarding the sleep of little children now” (47). Bella Donna believes that she has rescued Oblivia from parental and community neglect: “*Did you see anyone else digging you out of that tree? . . . Even your own parents had forgotten who you were*” (Wright 20; emphasis in original). Bella Donna also “liked talking about

surviving, intervention, closing the gap, moving forward,” which makes the Aboriginal swamp people believe that “she was really a local-bred redneck after all” (34). The Aboriginal people understand the neocolonial agenda behind her rhetoric: “Swamp people were not ignorant of white people who, after all, had not turned up yesterday” (22). The Intervention, the narrator unambiguously asserts, is solely about power: “[T]he Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people” (47). The effects on Aboriginal people, as the novel makes clear, constitute a continuation of the trauma of colonialism.

It is significant that Oblivia Ethylene is a name that Bella Donna bequeaths upon the Aboriginal child, given that the European woman cultivates Oblivia’s forgetfulness when it comes to her traumatic history, her cultural heritage, and thus her sovereignty. Oblivia’s memory is “created by what the old woman had chosen to tell her” (89). Oblivia is also tranquilized by the “ether” of Bella Donna’s nostalgic European stories about white swans (44). As Jane Gleeson-White suggests, Oblivia “is the swan princess, a vessel into which Bella Donna introduces her alien swan stories,” which range “from Leda and the north-pointing Cygnus constellation, to Hans Christian Andersen’s story . . . Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*.” Wright’s novel evokes the concept of the Dreamtime (the Aboriginal belief systems thus named by Western anthropologists) to denounce Oblivia’s indoctrination by Bella Donna: “[I]t was a foreigner’s *Dreaming* she had” (16). Bella Donna’s name suggests that, while those foreign stories might be beautiful to behold, their effect is deadly. Oblivia’s cultural identity—and her autonomy—is softly destroyed.

Like Azaro in Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Oblivia functions as a synecdoche of the postcolonial nation. The focus on the child as the battleground for truth and sovereignty in both magical realist novels is conspicuous and highlights their interest in futurity.³ It is also notable that in both texts the battle is ultimately fought in a supernatural realm. *The Swan Book* becomes increasingly hallucinatory after Oblivia’s removal from the swamp as the promised wife of Warren Finch, a “Barack-Obama type” Aborigine who blows up the swamp and becomes

the President of Australia (141). Oblivia is abducted from the swamp in the company of Finch and his three bodyguards, Aboriginal men with PhDs who are ironically described as “genies” (202). She is accompanied at various times by the ghost of Bella Donna as well as the ghost of an old Aboriginal lawman called the Harbour Master, who is hostile toward Oblivia’s victimhood. He whispers roughly and unsympathetically to her: “[S]how some backbone like the rest of our people” (36; emphasis in original). He believes that Bella Donna is “mothering Aboriginal weakness” rather than rewarding “Aboriginal strength” (38), which he identifies as the “whole idea of racism” (38–39). Indeed, the ghosts of the Harbour Master and Bella Donna compete to give Oblivia ideological direction during her various adventures, which include being trapped in a tower and swept away in a flood. Both magical events metaphorically signify the effects of ideology.

Detached from reality and rendered mute, Oblivia is clearly affected by trauma. However, trauma is not the “cause” of Wright’s magical realist narrative, as Arva argues of magical realism (3; emphasis in original). The novel is too ironic and self-reflexive for this to be the case. Oblivia’s silence and disconnection from historical reality are portrayed to metonymically represent the condition of Aboriginal people in colonial Australia. As Maryam Azam writes, Oblivia’s muteness is akin to “the voicelessness of most Aboriginal people when it comes to being able to talk about and address their vision for the future.” Additionally, the novel is not engaged in authenticating Oblivia’s trauma or sacralizing her victimhood; its ultimate agenda is ironizing traumatic colonial histories to imagine a sovereign future.

Oblivia’s “quest,” as the framing prelude to the novel announces, is to dislodge the foreign “virus” in her mind and “regain sovereignty over [her] . . . brain” (Wright 1, 4). The context of this quest for independence is a world dominated by European epistemologies, which have taken over Oblivia’s identity and positioned her as, among other things, a hopeless victim. In the prelude to the novel, the first-person narrator relates: “The virus thinks I want what it wants—to hide in a dark corner of its lolly pink bed, where it dreams, in my diseased mind” (5). The novel represents the setting for the quest in notably feminine and

domestic terms. Oblivia must engage in a kind of housecleaning of the mind in order to assert a sovereign identity. She must break out of the claustrophobic space of colonial trauma. The passivity and dreaminess associated with traditional femininity and traumatized victimhood must be rejected. Wright's novel is thus similar to magical realist texts such as Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, which advocates, as I argued earlier, historical agency (as represented by the politically engaged Alba) over dreamy passivity (as symbolized by Clara, who ultimately embodies a narcissistic retreat into fantasy).

Oblivia's identity is intimately connected to the idea of home, with the notion of country integral to Aboriginal identity. Oblivia must secure "what it means to have a homeland" in a nation of homeless people in which even the black swans of the south have become displaced due to the ecological disturbances brought about by climate change (Wright 4). It is no easy task. However, Oblivia's identification with the native Australian black swan, rather than the white swan of Bella Donna's imperialistic fantasies, offers hope. In the novel's epilogue, Oblivia has returned to the swamp, where she nurses a black swan called "Stranger." The ending of Wright's novel resists essentialism and exoticism of the kind often associated with magical realism and offers a powerful image of self-healing and sovereign "otherness."

V. Conclusion

The key to a dynamic reading of magical realism and a productive understanding of its engagement with colonial trauma (in its various guises) is a recognition of the ironic nature of the narrative mode. Magical realism, which represents the outlandishly unreal as real, is almost paradigmatically ironic. It also repeatedly employs that ironic narrative strategy, in Hutcheon's words, "to suggest that the interpreter should be open to other possible meanings" (154). History needs rethinking. Díaz's and Wright's ironic novels demonstrate how magical realist texts demand a rigorous re-engagement with the traumatic histories of colonialism. These novels are not authentic expressions of cultural identity or of historical trauma; they critically engage with the colonial past in order to pave the way towards a postcolonial future.

Throughout this essay I have deliberately drawn parallels between Díaz's and Wright's novels and other magical realist texts. My intention with this comparative approach is to advance the shift away from authenticating readings of magical realist fiction, whether grounded in ethnicity or trauma, and toward an ironic or literary reading of these novels. As Caroline Rody argues in her study of Joseph Skibell's and Jonathan Safran Foer's magical realist Holocaust texts, magical realism constitutes a "transnational aesthetic" that is "clearly enabled by García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and global company, and . . . pays homage to that cross-cultural affiliation, that fellowship" (57). This is demonstrated explicitly in Díaz's novel, which affirms the magical realist narrative strategy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is also apparent in the richly intertextual literary games of Wright's text, which includes allusive references to García-Márquez-ian bananas and butterflies (Wright 98). Rody describes magical realist literature as a "global, post-modern, literary mode . . . that self-consciously mourns the horrors of the twentieth century" (57). However, as my readings of Díaz's *Oscar Wao* and Wright's *The Swan Book* suggest, magical realist texts provide more than a self-conscious lament for the postcolonial or traumatic past; they interrogate that history in order to envision a genuinely postcolonial and post-traumatic future.

Notes

- 1 Benito, Manzanar, and Simal—whose case studies include Díaz's *Oscar Wao*—distinguish a "consciously experimental strand" within magical realism that is "ironizing, relativizing, and questioning" (113). They also critically engage with anthropological theories of magical realism. Nevertheless, they seek to uphold the validity of ethnographic readings, differentiating between magical realist texts tailored "for massive marketing and consumption, and texts that significantly influence, dialogue with, and reshape the cultural realities from which they emerge" (124). This new subcategory of inauthentic magical realist texts, however, effectively diverts attention away from the fundamental problems of anthropological readings—which include, as noted by Hegerfeldt, the status of even Third World magical realist writers as "privileged . . . intellectuals" (*Lies* 1) and the exploitation of "post-Enlightenment constructions of the 'Other' as non-rational and non-scientific" ("Contentious Contributions" 71).

- 2 The intersections between magical realism and science fiction apparent in my case studies remain to be fully explored. At this stage I am solely interested in how that intersection speaks of the Janus-faced nature of magical realist literature, which reinvestigates a traumatic past in order to imagine a better future.
- 3 The use of a child protagonist—common in magical realist fiction—also recalls the colonial past. The image of the postcolonial subject as inherently childlike was part of a damaging colonial ideology that discursively justified its “patronage.”

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