

## Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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### I.

In numerous discussions of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* conducted during interviews and public appearances, Junot Díaz has repeatedly suggested and even stated outright that readers should consider the relationship between authority exercised in the world at large and that of a story's narrator. "Isn't storytelling," he asks, "the desire to put everything about the world in your power?" (Díaz, "Junot Díaz Redefines Macho"). Although he claims his intention is to draw attention to "the dangers of the single voice" (Díaz, "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: Questions for Junot Díaz"), Díaz, following the practice of many writers who discuss their books publicly, continues to exemplify that voice by attempting to shape how the novel is read. He insists that "Yunior's telling of this story and his unspoken motivations for it are at the heart of the novel" (Díaz, "Junot Díaz Redefines Macho"), but it might also be said that the interviews, and Díaz's unspoken motivations for them, are equally central. An author's compulsion to control does not necessarily end with publication. Like his narrator Yunior (and perhaps like all narrators), Díaz is torn between the competing needs to challenge authority and to exercise it. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* attempts to acknowledge and incorporate this internal struggle; it incorporates the struggle's most paradoxical feature, the notion that the act of telling is itself an exercise of power, into the deepest design of the novel.

Even before he begins to tell Oscar's story, Yunior frames it in a way that both reflects his own ambivalence toward authority and places it in an historical, and quasi-mythic, context. The book's first epigraph, "Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?" is spoken by one of the über-villains of the science fiction comic book world. Not incidentally, Galactus addresses Uatu the Watcher and sometime Teller, whose

mission is to stand guard over Earth without interfering. Uatu occasionally does intervene, however, most notably to protect Earth from the godlike Galactus. Yuniór, who has watched over Oscar intermittently and perhaps intervened too seldom, finds it useful to identify with Uatu: “It’s almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty and retires at last to the Blue Area of the Moon” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 329). Moreover, the book’s title, chosen by Yuniór himself (285), is a clear refutation of Galactus’ words. In the second epigraph, an excerpt from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Schooner Flight,” the narrator, Shabine, a man with “a sound colonial education” (350), talks back to history and, as Yuniór tries to do, to the tyrannies imposed by colonialism. Understanding that “all them bastards have left us” is “words” (Walcott 350), Shabine makes the most of the situation and uses language to construct an identity and textual space for himself that is his own “nation.” For Yuniór, however, the effort is complicated by his own narrative’s genesis within the totalitarian history written by the Dominican Galactus, Rafael Trujillo.

Díaz knows well that dictators in the real world can be highly accomplished storytellers. In Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat*, the breaking point for one of Trujillo’s assassins occurs when the dictator attacks the Church, turning himself into “one of Satan’s most effective allies” (187), a dark god who, like Satan, usurps the prerogatives of the Almighty. The tyrant not only terrorized, imprisoned, and murdered countless Dominicans, but also subverted and erased their sense of identity, attempting “to take away the stories [they] told about themselves” (Patteson 233) and thus strip them of cognitive and physical control of their lives. This erasure, the most fundamental of his crimes, had its origin in his power to reformulate the whole narrative of the Dominican Republic with himself as both author and superhero—Father of the New Fatherland. In a sense, Díaz takes up where Vargas Llosa leaves off, not in his depiction of the *Trujillato*, which covers much of the same ground,<sup>1</sup> but in his exploration of the writer’s ability to exercise power over the space he commands through his narration. “What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway?” Yuniór asks in one of his lengthy footnotes. “Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural an-

tagonists,” he continues, “but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 97; emphasis in original). Díaz must be aware that the Spanish *dedr* (to tell) and the English and Spanish words for dictator share the same Latin root. Edward Said touches on this relationship when he explores “a constellation of linked meanings” of the word *authority*, including “a power to enforce obedience” or “to inspire belief” and “a connection as well with *author*—that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something . . . a person also who sets forth written statements” (83; emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup> Moving further back to the Latin *auctoritas*, Said finds “production, invention, cause,” and perhaps most pertinently to Yunior, “a right of possession” (83).

Although Yunior only gradually identifies himself and his own part in the story of Oscar Wao, from the very beginning he emphasizes the task of writing it down; frequent references to “this book” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 6), “our narrative” (12), “the manuscript” (114), and “my first draft” (132) indicate not only a long and meticulous process of composition but also his own “right of possession” within it. The novel is a carefully constructed text, with Oscar’s biography evolving into an exploration of his family’s violent history in the Dominican Republic, an excavation of the Trujillo regime, and an examination of the nature of dictatorship itself, both public and private. In telling such a multifaceted tale, Yunior blurs distinctions between history and fiction to fashion a syncretic textual space—Dominican and American—that is narrated in an equally syncretic language combining English, Spanish, street slang (in both languages), fanboy jargon, and the jargon of the academy.<sup>2</sup> Although this distinctive voice makes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the most linguistically rich Caribbean or American novel to appear in quite some time, Díaz signals in numerous ways that the voice is above all an instrument of Yunior’s power. When he admonishes the reader with phrases such as “Negro, please—this ain’t a fucking comic book!” (138), there is no doubt as to who is in control. Oscar de Leon, the obese, superhero-obsessed nerd, may be the novel’s protagonist, but lurking behind him is the choreographer of this complicated version of

his world, a man who halfway through the text allows himself to admit: “It started with me” (167).

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is at least three novels in one: the story of Oscar; a tale of immigration to America against a backdrop of tyranny (which Díaz invites readers to see as a manifestation of the mythic trauma experienced by the New World since 1492); and a novel about writing and its power to construct and shape an alternative reality. To appreciate how fully the narratives of biography and immigration are linked to the narrative of writing, it is necessary to unpack the identity of Yunior, who, in addition to being Oscar’s friend and the erstwhile lover of Oscar’s sister Lola, is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. The few details that Yunior reveals about his family and his past life confirm that he is the same Yunior who appears in Díaz’s memorable first book, the short story collection *Drown*. In the novel, Yunior presents himself as almost the opposite of his awkward friend Oscar: fit, muscular, in every way the “typical” Dominican male. When Oscar meets a girl who might be interested in him, Yunior reflects, “I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action? Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn’t even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me, who had pussy coming out my ears?” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 185; emphasis in original). Yet he occasionally lets slip a side of his personality that makes his sympathy for Oscar more understandable. The section of the novel covering their college years at Rutgers begins with an account of a mugging that puts Yunior in the hospital. A few pages later, having promised Lola that he will look after Oscar, he reasserts his masculinity: “I mean, shit, I was a *weight lifter*, picked up bigger fucking piles than him every damn day” (171). This declaration, however, is followed by a stand-alone remark, almost an aside: “You can start the laugh track anytime you want” (171).

Hints that Yunior has his own vulnerable side are scattered throughout *Oscar Wao*, and readers of *Drown* will not be surprised to discover them. In the stories of his childhood, Yunior hardly steps out of the shadow of his older brother. “I always followed Rafa,” he recalls, “trying to convince him to let me tag along” (Díaz, *Drown* 6). Boastful, confident,

and already sexually experienced at the age of twelve, Rafa is Yuniór's hero. After they join their father in America, Yuniór vomits every time he rides in a car, while Rafa continues to chase girls. In contrast Yuniór admits, "Sure, I liked girls but I was always too terrified to speak to them" (32). He is, in Rafa's words, "a pussy" (13). Although Yuniór idolizes his brother, he also depicts him as an egotistical bully. The first and penultimate stories in *Drown*, which focus on an island boy whose face has been eaten by a pig, offer an early view of Yuniór's ambivalent attitude toward authority in *Oscar Wao*. In "Ysrael," Rafa and Yuniór travel a considerable distance to see the disfigured boy. Rafa smashes a bottle on his head, kicks him, and rips off the protective mask he wears, while Yuniór looks on passively. In "No Face," a still masked Ysrael reappears as a fan of a comic book superhero, Kalimán, "who takes no shit and wears a turban. . . . He has his power of INVISIBILITY and no one can touch him" (Díaz, *Drown* 155). Later, when his little brother asks him where he has been, he says, "I've been fighting evil" (160). Ysrael is a prototype for the alienated Oscar de León (a.k.a. Wao). Alternately ridiculed and despised, both take refuge in a fantasy world in which villainy can be defeated by superheroes. Yuniór is also familiar with that world, as he slyly reveals in a reference to Oscar early in the novel: "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 21). Yuniór's struggle, adumbrated in *Drown*, is between his interior Rafa and his interior Oscar. He remembers that his brother once angrily told him, "Don't you mirror me" (Díaz, *Drown* 25), yet he continues to do so into adulthood.<sup>3</sup> His telling of the story of Oscar Wao, victim of tyrannies large and small, is in some measure an effort to write himself beyond the authoritarian legacies of Rafa, their policeman father, and the Dominican dictatorship.

In his short, untitled preface to the novel, Yuniór ruminates in detail on *fukú*, "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 1), and its numerous manifestations, both large and small. The idea of such a curse has long been a part of Dominican folk tradition. "No matter what its name or provenance," Yuniór explains, "it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the

world, and we've all been in the shit ever since" (1). As Yunior rapidly riffs through the centuries from one example to another (Trujillo, Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination), it becomes apparent that *fukú*, in its more momentous manifestations, has everything to do with the abuse of authority (beginning with the Conquest itself); he also observes that, on lower frequencies, "[e]verybody in Santo Domingo has a *fukú* story knocking around in their family" (5). And although he insists that "Whether [he] believe[s] in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point," he adds that "no matter what you believe, *fukú* believes in you" (5). At that point Yunior is ready to announce: "I have a *fukú* story too" (6). Before launching into that story, however, he reveals that there is a charm that can be used against *fukú*, called *zafa*. Oscar's *fukú* story, Yunior implies, is a product of the same doomed, oppressive history that brought Columbus' ships to America five hundred years ago. That story must be rewritten if the curse is to be lifted: "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). Oscar's story is *fukú*; its retelling in Yunior's text ("as I write these words") is *zafa*. And yet, for Yunior, the composition of the text dictates that he not only record Oscar's brief, wondrous life but impose some kind of cognitive control over it as well.

## II.

Yunior implicitly reasserts his authority every time he refers to the writing process, but his part in arranging the textual landscape is most baldly exposed when he comments on sources of information and the veracity of events in the story. Although the book is "supposed to be a *true* account" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* ii; emphasis in original), Yunior openly confesses in a footnote that he has exercised his power as narrator to make alterations:

In my first draft, Samami was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the

perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the end of the Worl”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. (132)

By “couldn’t change,” Yuniór means from fiction to something closer to truth. His admission opens a path of inquiry into a number of elements within the text such as artfully arranged coincidences and images or phrases that recur in improbably different contexts. Yuniór’s supposedly true account also contains an overwhelming amount of information that he could hardly have gleaned from either Lola or her mother. He asserts more than once that Beli never spoke of the nine years she spent with an abusive foster family, “monstrous people if the rumors are to be believed” (78), yet he is apparently privy to a dream she has about that period (261). Even more implausibly, though he has conceded that the family’s silence surrounding the tragedy of Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather, “sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction” (243), he nevertheless reports generously on matters that no one could have told him about, such as the content of a nightmare visited on Socorro, the mother that Beli never knew, and details of Abelard’s incarceration in the notorious Nigiia prison, when he was isolated from the world. As Yuniór himself might say, Talk about an omniscient narrator!

In spite of all this, Yuniór repeatedly attempts to convince the reader that his text commands the authority of a factual, or nearly factual, document. Describing Beli’s disastrous romance with a Trujillo operative and brother-in-law known as the Gangster, he admits that hard intelligence is limited. “I’ll give you what I’ve managed to unearth,” he says modestly, implying a scrupulous adherence to fact. Soon afterward he mentions having part of Beli’s story “right here on tape” (160), and although he does not specify whether the taped testimony is that of Lola, her daughter, or La Inca, her adoptive mother, the implication again points to a meticulously researched manuscript. Near the end of the novel, Yuniór strongly emphasizes his adherence to the facts. Ruminating on the temptation to create a different version of Ybón, the prostitute with whom Oscar falls hopelessly in love, he says, “But then

I'd be lying. 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. Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?" (ii). Yet he follows his seemingly rhetorical question by saying, "This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix" (285). The choice between illusion and reality is not as clear as it might seem. In the film *The Matrix* (1999) a mysterious man named Morpheus offers Neo the choice of a blue pill or a red pill. If he takes the red one he can discover the truth, which is that the world he lives in is an illusion created by a giant computer; if he takes the blue pill he will forget about the meeting and continue living a life of illusion. If taking the red pill means the reader must continue with Yunior's text in search of the truth, it is nevertheless only Yunior's truth, a "narrative reconstruction," that can be discovered.

Yunior employs several strategies to dismantle a "single voice" informed by totalitarian categories of discourse, including the use of untranslated Spanish to challenge the assumed hegemony of English and the subversion of canonical history—in both the extensive footnotes and the main text—by interweaving factual and fictional material. Just as importantly, he is not the only writer in the novel. His main window into the de Leon family is Lola, who narrates two sections of *Oscar Wao* in the first person, thereby slightly reducing the totality of Yunior's control over the text. At times, her narrative seems to be taken directly from her journal, as when she says, "I'm into my sixth month here and these days I'm just trying to be philosophical about the whole thing" (70). Elsewhere, however, her narrative morphs into something akin to a long letter to Yunior: "[T]hat's not what I wanted to tell you" (72), she says at one point, and later, "I don't think I really stopped [crying] until I met you" (210).

The nature of her brother Oscar's writing is clearer, and he's far more prolific (he is working on a fifth novel by his senior year in high school), even if Yunior quotes virtually none of it. Yunior's comments on Oscar's incessant writing are often facetious, if not outright dismissive: "When I got back from the weight room Oscar was at his computer—on page

a billion of his new novel” (184). Even when Yuniór quotes Oscar’s spoken words, the purpose is usually to highlight his oddity; Yuniór relates that Oscar thinks Ana is “orchidaceous” (35), and tells Manny, Ana’s boyfriend, that he is “into the more speculative genres” (43). Yet the macho weightlifter and self-described chick magnet occasionally expresses a grudging admiration for his fat and socially inept friend who, he says, “never stopped writing—loved writing the way I loved cheating” (186). The only piece of Oscar’s writing that Yuniór includes within his own tightly controlled narrative is a letter to Lola contained in a package delivered after his death. Unsurprisingly, the letter is paraphrased and summarized by Yuniór, but he does allow Oscar the last word. Having described his first and only experience of sexual intercourse, which occurred shortly before his murder, Oscar writes, “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335). The faint, ironic echo of Kurtz’s last words in *Heart of Darkness* only underscores the horror, the horror, of the price Oscar pays for that moment of bliss.

Perhaps the most important writer in the novel, aside from Yuniór himself, is Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard Cabral, a physician in the town of La Vega. Financially secure, socially prominent, professionally respected, and the author of four books, Abelard’s position should have been unassailable. He is ostensibly arrested for making a politically charged joke about Trujillo, but the real reason is connected to his attempt to shield one of his daughters from the dictator’s lecherous interest.<sup>4</sup> Imprisoned for fourteen years, he never knows about the mysterious deaths of his wife, Socorro, and his daughters, Jackie and Astrid.<sup>5</sup> In prison, he is tortured with devices bearing names such as *el pulpo* (the octopus) and La Corona, a wet rope tied around the head and allowed to tighten in the tropical sun until it turns the prisoner “into a vegetable” (251). What happens to Abelard is worse than death. He is erased. La Corona extinguishes “the proud flame of his intellect” (251), and when he dies, he is buried “in an unmarked grave somewhere outside of Nigüa” (251). Moreover, “none of Abelard’s books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive,” nor even “one scrap of paper with his handwriting” (246). Yuniór’s speculation that

the extremity of Abelard's punishment might have its source in rumors of another, unfinished book he was writing about Trujillo's supposed supernatural origins and "Dark Powers" (245), chillingly echoes the fate of Jesús de Galíndez, whose anti-Trujillo dissertation at Columbia University resulted in his being kidnapped, taken to the Dominican Republic, tortured, and killed.<sup>6</sup> Part II of *Oscar Wao*, which contains Abelard's story, begins with an excerpt from an article in the Dominican newspaper *La Nadon*, which reads in part, "Men are not indispensable. But Trujillo is irreplaceable. For Trujillo is not a man. He is . . . a cosmic force" (204). Such a characterization was part of the narrative of Trujillo. The counter-narrative, which includes Galíndez's dissertation, Abelard's rumored book, and *Oscar Wao* itself, is epitomized by the inscription on the monument erected not to deify Trujillo but to honor the men who killed him: "Men of steel, who that bright night executed in this place the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, putting an end to the most horrible tyranny in all Latin American history."<sup>7</sup> The dialectic of narrative, erasure, and counter-narrative informs *Oscar Wao* on the novel's deepest levels, and nobody knows better than its narrator how important it is who tells the story.

### III.

When Shabine in "The Schooner Flight" states, "J met History once, but he ain't recognize me" (Walcott 350), he speaks directly to the nullities that can result from the exercise of power; the section of the poem at the beginning of *Oscar Wao*, however, ends on a more hopeful note:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
I had a sound colonial education,  
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.

Nobody or a nation, erasure or a narrated identity: this is the reality that lies behind Yunior's effort to tell Oscar's story. All forms of dictatorship, large and small, are a threat to narrated, individual identity. Even Oscar de Leon's rebranding as "Oscar Wao" is a way of replacing his individuality with the punch line of someone else's joke. When Oscar dresses as

Doctor Who one Halloween, Yuniór tells him that he looks like “that fat homo Oscar Wilde.” The name, with its Dominican pronunciation “Wao,” sticks: “And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks dude started *answering* to it” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 180; emphasis in original). More ambitious dictators find ways of erasing individuality in entire societies, as Trujillo attempted to do in the Dominican Republic.<sup>8</sup> The Walcott quotation is the book’s “zafa” epigraph, demonstrating a way out of erasure through words. Glissant argues that “literary production” is primarily “an act of survival” and that “The storyteller is a handyman, the *djobbeur* of the collective soul” (*Poetics* 68–69). Glissant is mainly concerned with the silences and blankness imposed by colonial authority, particularly in the Caribbean, but many forms of oppression produce similar results. After describing the effects of Beli’s savage beating in the canefield, Yuniór asks, “Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it’s not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 147). Hope, language, and life fall together on one end of a kind of spectrum, staring down despair, silence, and death at the opposite end. The end of language produces a blank page, and nothing is more frightening to a writer, a *djobbeur* of the soul like Yuniór—not least of all because it is in some measure his own soul that he wants to save.

Throughout the novel, Yuniór repeatedly refers to *páginas en blanco*—blank pages in the history of a society, a family, or an individual. Beli’s horrific experiences through the age of nine constitute one example—her “very own página en blanco” (78). Yuniór also cites a page in the memoir of Joaquín Balaguer, the man who succeeded Trujillo. Suspected of being implicated in the death of the journalist Orlando Martínez, he wrote that he knew who did it “and left a blank page . . . in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death” (90). As with Abelard’s disappearance into the bowels of Nigüía prison and the erasure of everything he wrote, the Balaguer blank page remained blank. “Even your Watcher,” Yuniór acknowledges, “has his silences, his páginas en blanco” (149).<sup>9</sup> His specific reference is to Beli’s vision of “an amiable mongoose” (149) while she lies dying in the canes after her brutal beating. The mongoose talks her back to life, reminding her

that she must live to have her future life and children. The mystery for Yuniór—that is, the blank page—is whether the mongoose was “a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether” (149). The image appears again to fulfill a similar function, years later, in a dream Oscar has shortly after his own first beating. In both cases the power of words is set against the ultimate blank page, the final erasure. “When words fail you,” Paul Auster writes, “you dissolve into an image of nothingness. You disappear” (205). For Yuniór, the text represents, among other things, life; the book he writes is an effort to fill the blank left by Oscar’s death.

The face is the most immediately visual sign of an individual’s identity. It is also a kind of text; we often speak of “reading” someone’s face. The recurrence within Yuniór’s text of the man without a face is disturbing because it is closely associated with the frightening implications of blankness and erasure. The figure initially appears to Beli, first as a man sitting in front of a hovel beside a highway and then as one of Trujillo’s uniformed thugs who has come to teach her a lesson. She escapes with the help of a friend, but a few days later the thug and his partner return, this time successfully abducting her and taking her into the canefields for the beating that nearly kills her. Oscar, on the way to his own first beating in the cane, thinks he sees an almost identical faceless man sitting “out in front of his ruined house” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 298). Both Beli and Socorro have nightmares featuring the faceless man. Beli sees the foster father who scalded her with hot grease when she was a child: “She . . . even dreamt about the Burning, how her ‘father’s’ face had turned blank at the moment he picked up the skillet” (261). In Socorro’s dream, which occurs shortly before Abelard is taken, “the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (237). Each manifestation embodies a nameless, faceless horror, not only of the anonymous *apparatchik* (or in this case *matón*) knocking at the door but of the message he delivers: silence, blankness, and an end to meaning.

When the faceless man appears for the last time in the novel, in one of Yuniór’s dreams, he emerges from an area of his subconscious in which

Oscar's story and his own have grown very close together. This final manifestation is an echo, and also perhaps another kind of narrative reconstruction, of a dream Oscar has while recovering from his first beating: "An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he saw that the book was blank" (302). Toward the end of the text, Yunior writes:

About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We're in some kind of ruined bailey that's filled to the rim with old dusty books. He's standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look. . . . It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. . . . Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (325)

As dreams often do, Oscar's nightmare seems to lay one signification on top of another, from the terrifying faceless men of family legend to the anonymity forced on his own grandfather. Yunior's version takes the shift from perpetrator to victim a step further in identifying the faceless man with the blank book as Oscar himself. The dread inspired by his recognition has its roots in *Drown's* Ysrael, the first "No Face" (Díaz, *Drown* 151) victim in Yunior's life. Behind the mask, a facsimile of a face, lies nothing. Yunior's path is clear, although it takes him another five years to begin. He must put a face on Oscar by turning the blank book into text.

After Oscar's murder, Lola swears she will never return to the Dominican Republic: "Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 324). But the impulse to use power to gain control over others is even wider than that, as Yunior understands. *Oscar Wao* ultimately asks how the Other be encountered without resorting to assimilation—the denial of otherness altogether—or annihilation. For Yunior, Oscar represents all the Others who have been ridiculed, excluded, or negated.

Oscar experiences the same realization. After graduating from college he goes back to his old high school, Don Bosco Tech, as a substitute teacher: “Every day he watched the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay—and in everyone of these clashes he saw himself” (264).

These are the people Yuniór frequently addresses as “Negro” (or worse), speaking directly to all who have been on the receiving end of what Wilson Harris somewhat grandiosely calls “conquistadorial legacies of civilization” (xv). In telling the story, Yuniór attempts to distance himself from such a hegemonic point of view, even while acknowledging its intrinsic role in shaping rational discourse. He wants us to believe that his story is ours as well. But is it? Within the territory of the text, after all, *auctoritas* still resides largely with the narrator, by “right of possession” (Said 83). At the end of the novel, Yuniór has transformed Oscar’s *fukú* into art through the zafa of narrative power. If the result is a “reconstruction” created and, finally, controlled by Yuniór himself, the best he can do may be to put a face, or at least a plausible mask, on a faceless man; to write a countertext that History will recognize, filling in just enough *páginas en blanco* to ensure that neither Oscar Wao nor Oscar de Leon will ever be completely erased.

## Notes

- 1 The two novels touch on many of the same events (the *perejil* massacre, the murder of the Mirabal sisters, the Galíndez affair, and so forth), but Yuniór’s take on the Trujillo era differs somewhat from that of Vargas Llosa.
- 2 The multiplicity of cultural strands embodied in Yuniór’s voice is dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense of the word. As Rimmon-Kenan explains: “This polyphonic quality is achieved both by the juxtaposition of several voices in the text itself and by the text’s integration of previous discourse, be it anterior literary texts or aspects of language and culture at large” (115). An article will surely emerge analyzing *Oscar Wao* in these terms. But Oscar is also very much a Caribbean novel. The Caribbean, as Glissant maintains, is “the estuary of the Americas,” and a discourse like Yuniór’s in which multiple linguistic and cultural origins combine with an imperative to mutate (like an estuary merging into the sea in a constant state of exchange and translation) is profoundly estuarial. Or to put

- it another way, “The literature of the Caribbean seeks to differentiate itself from the European not by excluding cultural components that influenced its formation, but rather, on the contrary, by moving toward the creation of an ethnologically promiscuous text” (Glissant 139; Benitez-Rijo 189).
- 3 It continues even after Rafa’s death from leukemia (167)—an event also described in one of Diaz’s pre-*Oscar Wao* short stories, “Nilda.” Like much of Diaz’s work, “Nilda” was first published in *The New Yorker* (Oct. 4, 1999).
  - 4 Trujillo’s fondness for young girls was well known and much feared by families who had attractive daughters. One of the central plot lines of Vargas Llosa’s *El Fiesta del Chivo* explores this aspect of his character.
  - 5 According to information Yunior is able to pull together, Socorro was hit by a truck in 1946, two months after giving birth to Oscar’s mother; two years later, Jackie drowned in a swimming pool containing only two feet of water. In 1951, Astrid was hit by a “stray” bullet while praying in church. Abelard lived on in prison until 1961: “It was said he died a couple of days before Trujillo was assassinated” (Diaz, *Oscar Wao* 251).
  - 6 Galíndez’s dissertation, *The Era of Trujillo*, was published shortly after his death in 1956 (despite Trujillo’s efforts to destroy it) and contributed to a gathering wave of opposition to Trujillo throughout the hemisphere. The Galíndez affair is explained with Yunior’s characteristic street-smart spin in *Oscar Wao* (Diaz 97). It also figures prominently in *La Fiesta del Chivo* and is mentioned in Julia Alvarez’s Trujillo novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*.
  - 7 The actual inscription reads, in full:
 

*Monumento a los gloriosos heroes del 30 de mayo de 1961. Hombres de acero, que esa noche luminosa ajusticiaron en este lugar al dictador Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, poniendo asi fin a la tirania mas horrenda de toda la historia Latinoamericana. Honrar a los que luchan por la libertad, nos ayudara a no olvidar sus ideales.*
  - 8 As Hannah Arendt famously observes, “Total domination . . . strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual . . . and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions” (438).
  - 9 Yunior’s own blank pages mainly involve his relationship with Lola, Oscar’s sister. Although he lets details slip out gradually, and finally reveals the depth of his feelings for her, much is left out, particularly the question of how much of his motivation for writing the book grows out of his unrequited love. Early in their acquaintance, Lola asks Yunior to look after Oscar, and he repeatedly fails to live up to her expectations. Near the end of the novel, Yunior reflects, “Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved . . . and I’d finally try to say words that could have saved us” (Diaz, *Oscar Wao* 327). The novel might be read as both an act of penance and an effort to fill in the blank between himself and Lola.

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