Invoking Joyce, Avoiding Imitation:

Junot Díaz’s Portrait of Nerds in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) is a tale of Oscar de León and his family, who immigrated from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey. Díaz infuses his novel with events from Dominican history during the era of Rafael Trujillo, the dictator who governed the nation from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Unveiling the political terror of the Trujillato, *Oscar Wao* recounts the tyranny of the Dominican dictatorship: the text reveals how the Dominican dictator’s evil force haunts the De León-Cabral family across three generations, uprooting the family from its homeland. In this regard, many critics have placed *Oscar Wao* in context with the Caribbean, Latin American, African, or Dominican literary diaspora. However, rather than expanding Díaz’s literary influence, this scholarship tends to reduce *Oscar Wao* to a project of collapsing the curse of colonialism, therefore assigning the novel to the category of U.S. ethnic literature. For example, Monica Hanna, Ignacio López-Calvo, and Elena Machado Sáez situate *Oscar Wao* as a fiction for the Dominican American diaspora.[[1]](#endnote-1) Receiving *Oscar Wao* as a case of “US Ethnic literature,” the 2012 anthology, *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures* incorporates Richard Perez’s “Flashes of Transgression: The Fukú, Negative Aesthetics, and the Future in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” in which the author argues that Díaz aims to destroy the Dominican curse, called *fukú*, embodied in the novel by the Trujillato, by means of the act of writing, *zafa*.

Such an emphasis on Díaz’s Dominican background has led to a discussion of how the writer is associated with Latin American, diasporic, or writers of color who occupy the place of the racial Other. Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist, and the Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott, whose poem “The Schooner’s Flight” (1980) becomes one of Díaz’s epigraphs to *Oscar Wao*, remain the most frequently mentioned influencers of Díaz. Pamela J. Rader considers Rushdie a precursor who narrates personal versions of a nation’s history (3), and then implies a link between Rushdie and Díaz. Rader suggests that like Rushdie, Díaz reinvents history through fiction, turning “national and impersonal” accounts into personal histories (5). Drawing on Díaz’s use of Walcott’s poem, in which the poet says, “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,” Óscar Ortega Montero and Grant Glass, among others, find that *Oscar Wao* presents Díaz’s self-formation of Latin-American diasporic identity. Such readers note that Díaz’s referencing of Walcott’s poem, regarded as an embodiment of “the Caribbean melting pot” (Ortega Montero 10), aligns *Oscar Wao* with the poet’s engagement of ethnic identities. López-Calvo provides an intertextual reading of *Oscar Wao* by linking Díaz to Gabriel García Márquez, the Latin American magical realist, and to Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian magical realist who wrote a novel about the Trujillato, *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Identifying Díaz’s role in *Oscar Wao* as a “native informant” affected by Latin American magical realists (75), López-Calvo examines Díaz’s anxiety of influence provoked in writing *Oscar Wao*.

The purpose of this article is not to engage in a critical reception which traces Díaz’s roots to Latin American, Caribbean, or African diasporic writers. Rather, this article attempts to explore the possibilities of intertexual reading of *Oscar Wao* in relation to the fiction of James Joyce, the early twentieth century Irish modernist, a seemingly most distant precursor unbelonging to any ethnic, national and racial categories often used to demarcate Díaz. Excepting a few reviews of *Oscar Wao*, most scholarly criticisms have ignored any literary influence of Joyce upon Díaz.[[2]](#endnote-2) In fact, Ed Finn’s “Revenge of the Nerd: Junot Díaz and the Network of American Literary Imagination” (2011) enlarges the scope of the existing criticism by providing an extensive range of influencers such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Haas, and Don Delillo. Although Finn’s study modifies the critical tendency of categorizing Díaz as a diasporic writer of color, it also remains silent on the connection between Díaz and Joyce. In adding Joyce to the circle of Díaz’s predecessors, I seek to trace signs of Díaz’s detachment from Joyce as well as the precursor’s complex influence on the writing of *Oscar Wao*.

An intertextual reading of Díaz and Joyce dissociates Díaz from narrowly demarcated categories, thereby helping us rethink him. This approach may illuminate Díaz’s emphasis on a nonconformist’s aspiration for unbelonging, a desire for escaping domestic or national ties, a primary desire that emerges in the work of Joyce. Inheriting Joyce’s defense for an artist’s rejection of social conformity, Díaz embraces a character’s aspiration towards unbelonging by presenting it as a countercultural gesture that undermines solid frames of societies. As I shall describe, the desiring subjects of *Oscar Wao* are made to echo Joyce or Stephen Dedalus, an aesthetic protagonist appearing in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Joyce’s semi-autobiographical fiction where Stephen has established his ethos of detachment and resistance from his childhood to be a creative artist struggling to invent his own language.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, despite Díaz’s attachment to Joyce, he tries to engender new meanings in adapting Joyce’s literary modes and themes in order to show the gulf between Joyce’s hero and his characters. In the process, Díaz might want to affirm his detachment from Joyce. I shall first describe why Joyce is Díaz’s critically unmentioned but formidable precursor by drawing on his interviews, and by comparing and contrasting *Oscar Wao* with *A Portrait*. My discussion then speculates the way in which Díaz reacts to the Joycean style, which, in turn, proves his desire for originality as a creative writer.[[4]](#endnote-4) Finally, this article turns to the context where Díaz’s characters, especially Oscar, are difficult to sustain the core facets of Joycean heroes while acting as imitators of a dominant culture, rather than as an aesthetic innovator, a political rebel identified by both Díaz and Joyce.

**Díaz’s Joyce as a Model of the Aesthetic and Political Rebel**

In his interviews, Díaz declares the influence of his precursors by suggesting Rushdie and Toni Morrison as his most influential predecessors (Jenkins 17). He has also appreciated the long-range effects of Jack Kirby, Los Bros Hernandez, Samuel R. Delany, Edward Rivera, Octavia Butler, Leslie Marmon Silko, Manxine Hong Kingston, Stephen King, Arundhati Roy, Haruki Murakami, and others.[[5]](#endnote-5) Despite Díaz’s acknowledgement of the influence of many writers, one of his responses is particularly intriguing. In recognizing a stylistic affinity between Díaz and Joyce, Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian American writer who wrote *The Farming of Bones* (1998), a novel about the Trujillo period and the 1937 massacre of Haitian emigrants, asks Díaz, “Does Junot Díaz, minimalist in *Drown* and definitely Joycean here, dream of being the Dominican James Joyce?” To this question, Díaz answers that “I’m a Joyce fanatic—the Irish have had a colonial relationship with the English a long, long time and that’s one reason they’re so useful to immigrant writers of color in the US.” Yet, he soon distances himself from Joyce: “but I don’t dream of being Joyce any more than I dream of being Jack Kirby,” says Díaz.[[6]](#endnote-6) In his response, Díaz compares the possibility of becoming the new Joyce as unlikely as reinventing himself as the comic book artist famous for *The Fantastic Four.* Joyce is rather dismissed to the periphery, although the interview hints that Díaz’s attachment for Joyce seems far more complex than his feeling for Kirby: Díaz intimates his motivation to detach himself from Joyce, even if he remains a Joyce fanatic.

In contrast to the complexity of Joyce’s influence, the reason why Díaz finds kinship with Kirby is quite obvious. X-men, or so-called “mutants” created by Kirby and Stan Lee, embody Díaz’s own experience of living as a mutant in New Jersey. Growing up as a ghetto nerd, or “a smart kid in a poor-ass community,” Díaz felt like a mutant because he found himself to be an outsider both in the Dominican subculture and in mainstream white American society (Danticat). The experience of being an outsider enables the writer to grasp the racial metaphors of mutants: like mutants, considered outsiders and superheroes, he had to occupy a marginal position and rely on an inner source of strength. This situation appears in a footnote of *Oscar Wao,* where the author’s persona asks, “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U. S. ghetto” (23). Another footnote remarks, “My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside, it’s hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher” (95). According to Díaz, Kirby is an artist who creates mutants that embody an experience that parallels his own life in the genre of comic books that he identifies as “the narrative margins” (Danticat). This awareness of being marginal unambiguously ties Díaz to Kirby, which explains the author’s lack of hesitancy in revering the comic book artist.

Díaz’s relation to Joyce is far from simple however. This does not merely indicate that Díaz has conflicting feelings toward the precursor as extreme as love and hatred, or admiration and contempt. The complexity is recognized even when he openly proclaims his attachment for Joyce. In pointing out the strength of Joyce, Díaz associates Joyce with a distinctive and valued Irishness apart from European influence. Possibly, this statement invites us to presume that this writer is evaluating Joyce solely as a political activist writing on behalf of his nation. However, what I emphasize is that Díaz’s Joyce is not simply an Irish nationalist but a creative artist whose play of language generates aesthetic effects, seemingly unrelated to political thoughts. For instance, Díaz highly appreciates the aesthetic innovation of Joyce in a speech, introducing his favorite line from *Ulysses* (1922): “He walked by the treeshade of sunnywinking leaves.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Díaz remarks that this sentence “contains much of what I love in Joyce: the hoppity rhythms, the juggling of vowels (ee, aw, I, eh, ee, ay, uh, uh, ee, ih, ih, ee)” (Anderson). According to Díaz, “the odd compound nouns that both work together and pull against one another (shade, sunny)—all of which produces both a sense of precision and of not-quite-understanding” (Anderson). Finding Joyce’s use of words artistic, Díaz expresses his fascination with the precursor’s play of language that produces aesthetic effects by arousing a sense of certainty and uncertainty.

One might consider Díaz’s concern with Joyce’s aesthetic qualities as divergent from his focus on Joyce’s political commitment to anti-colonialism. However, these two aspects are not disjoined from one another but entwined from the perspective of Díaz as well as Joyce. Díaz’s aspiration to employ his own distinctive language in literary texts echoes the stylistic decisions of his predecessor to raise political arguments by means of aesthetic quests, involving an act of imagination. For example, in *A Portrait,* Joyce presents the political potential aroused by a schoolboy’s daydreaming. At school, Stephen’s mind wanders from the attempt to solve a classroom equation to images of red and white roses. Detached from the classroom setting, Stephen allows himself to drift from thought to thought. He ruminates on a “wild rose,” and misremembers the lyrics to “the song about the wild rose blossoms on the little green place” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 9). His imagination reaches the thought of a green rose, which signifies Ireland. Stephen is aware of the impossibility of a green rose, but through his daydream, he can envision that “perhaps somewhere in the world you could” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 9). As Rebecca L. Walkowitz cogently argues in *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism* Beyond *the Nation* (2006), Stephen’s temporary distraction constructs a replacement of “the cold utility of the schoolroom with the pleasure of artifice—a nonexistent rose” (67). In Joyce’s fiction, Stephen’s emotional wandering works to establish his ethos as an artist and anti-colonialist. Refusing to strive for social conformity, Stephen chooses the freedom of wandering, which renders him not only a “momentary escape” but also a critical reflection upon the “institutions in which he has been asked to participate” (Walkowitz 64, 67).

Joyce’s writing accommodates the writer’s rejection of service to English colonialism by portraying the artist who “resists a siren call from England” through his question of the use of language (Riquelme 106). An episode in *A Portrait* elucidates how Stephen’s question of language can generate anti-colonial sentiment toward the imperial dominance of England. In college, the English dean explains that the best way to feed oil into a lamp is “not to pour in more than the funnel can hold” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 204).When speaking to his dean, Stephen uses the Irish word “tundish,” instead of “funnel,” to mean the same object, but the Englishman cannot understand what he is talking about: the dean asks, “Is that called a tundish in Ireland?”(Joyce, *A Portrait* 204). In his conversation with the dean, who assumes that his language is superior to Stephen’s, Stephen feels that “the elder brother in the parable may have turned on the prodigal” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 204).The dean’s parochial attitude provokes Stephen’s consciousness of his Irish identity: the narrator says, “The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against this courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 205). Stephen realizes that the language in which they are speaking is “*his* before it is *mine*” (emphasis added): “how different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always before me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 205). Stephen’s sense of anti-colonialism is developed while he questions whether or not he can accept the language of the English as his own. In presenting Stephen’s challenge of the imperial dominance of the standard English, this episode in turn exposes Joyce’s rejection of the dominance of one superior culture. It also betrays Joyce’s anxiety of imitation. As Stephen draws a distinction between “his” (the English dean’s) language and “mine” (Stephen) in the text, Joyce seeks to promote the “mode of English appropriate for Irish experience” (Deane 31).

Díaz shares the anxiety of imitation of the so-called first language, which became Joyce’s primary concern. Corresponding to Joyce’s effort to engage more than one dominant language, in *Oscar Wao* the author invents a high degree of verbal play by means of mixing heterogeneous voices and multiple linguistic codes, including non-standard English, un-translated Spanish, and Spanish slang. Through inserting various languages into his English narrative, Díaz’s novel affords a polyvocal space that dismantles a “single voice” encouraged by “totalitarian categories of discourse” (Patterson 12). While Díaz demonstrates his potential for creating his own language in the text, housing heterogeneous verbal signs, the author simultaneously calls attention to the existence of immigrants such as “the marginalized Dominican presence within the Anglicized image that the US projects” (Mahler 137). In this way, Joyce can be an analogue for Díaz: they are both aesthetic innovators, and both emphasize political effects resulting from the creation of language. Like Joyce, Díaz recognizes and values an aesthetic subject’s resistance that makes room for creativity and heterogeneousness.

As suggested in *A Portrait*, Joyce champions an ostensibly apolitical hero such as Stephen in order to portray a cultural transgressor against British imperialism. The subject’s political resistance works not through direct participation in social activities but through consistent involvement in aesthetic activities such as the exploration of language. Refusing to take collective action, Stephen demands the freedom of being detached in order to resist the dominant culture. In addition, Stephen respects his own taste, as presented in an episode in which Stephen is mocked by a group of students for preferring Byron, the English Romantic poet thought to be a “heretic,” compared to the Victorian poet Tennyson, an icon of English national identity, whose work invokes conventional conformism to national ideals (Joyce, *A Portrait* 85-86). Through the power of imagination and disobedience, Stephen acquires his “tactic of heresy and insubordination,” and cultivates the ability to “think historically and politically about the institutions in which he has been asked to participate” (Walkowitz 84). In the context of Joyce, becoming the aesthetic heretic by rejecting British tastes contributes to demonstrate the subject’s power of political resistance to the dominant discourse shaped and sustained by the empire.

In Díaz’s words, Joyce’s Stephen could be affectionately described as a nerd, a nonconformist who chooses his or her own path without caring what anyone thinks. In the American cultural context, the term “nerd” is often used as a stereotypical designation to call a type of person whose behavior includes social awkwardness, sexual failure, and bookishness, notorious for their “largely destroyed glasses, the pair of pleated shorts that exposes thighs, the childlike laugh, the intense self-seriousness” (Nugent 11). Díaz, however, takes ownership of the term as subversive, associating the nerd with a defiant individual who struggles to stand alone in resistance to established social conditions. He introduces *Oscar Wao* as a story “about a family of nerds, where even the mother betrays her own nerdiness” as she “chooses her own path” (Jenkins 19). In the text, the author implies what he means by this term through a footnote. He mentions a historical figure, Jesus de Galíndez, a Columbia University graduate student who wrote “a rather unsettling doctoral dissertation” about the Trujillato (100). Galíndez, “a loyalist in the Spanish Civil War,” had taken refuge in Santo Domingo in 1939, and during this period, witnessed the terror of Trujillo. Strongly urged to expose the dictator’s terror, Galíndez could not resist writing about him (100). Díaz notes that Robert Crassweller, the author of *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator* (1966), calls Galíndez “a bookish man, a type frequently found among political activists in Latin America” (100). From Crassweller’s description, Díaz coins his own term to explain the bookish rebel: he refers to Galíndez as “a Basque super-nerd” (100), where bookishness, writing, and political subversion are conjoined to generate the connotations of nerd. In this regard, Joyce’s Stephen might also be considered a nerd when he becomes a nonconformist, although he is less a political activist than an aesthetic seeker who ultimately produces countercultural and political effects.

In *Oscar Wao*, the genealogy of nerds begins with Oscar’s grandfather Abelard Louis Cabral, “a brilliant doctor” and “a collector of rare books” who is “indefatigably curious, alarmingly prodigious, and especially suited for linguistic and computational complexity” (221). Abelard seems afraid of confronting the Trujillato, a fear that earns him the “reputation for being able to keep his head down during the worst of the regime’s madness” (223). However, Abelard’s efforts to keep “his head, eyes, and nose safely tucked into his books” as well as his strategy not “to think about El Jefe at all” (223) ironically lead him into protest. Despite his ostensible indifference to the political regime, Abelard has been fighting against Trujillo all along. In 1937, the year of the genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans, when “survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds,” Abelard “fixed them up as best as he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds” (223), thus committing treacherous acts against the Trujillato. Abelard takes another action to damage Trujillo’s authority. He writes a book about the Trujillo regime, in which he jokes about the dictator, arguing that Trujillo is “if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world” (255). Ostensibly, Abelard seems to avoid political activism, but he can manage to outwit the political tyrant by means of the pen. Producing the tactic of resistance, the scribbler creates the *zafa*, or counterspell, to the forces of the *fukú* by illuminating the existence of the dictator’s violent power.

**Díaz’s Discontent with a Mode of Aesthetic Epiphany**

In Beli Cabral, the “Final Daughter of one of the Cibao’s finest families,” Diaz adds another character to his circle of nerds who resist an oppressive regime. After Abelard was arrested in 1945, the orphaned Beli is forced to live with an abusive foster family, until she is later rescued by Abelard’s cousin, La Inca, a Catholic woman who strives to enlighten the girl in order to restore the lost glory of Abelard’s family. Raised in the hands of La Inca in Bani, a “city famed for its resistance to blackness” (80-81), Beli longs to escape from La Inca, who is preoccupied with her mission to change Beli by giving her “a proper education” (84). La Inca forces her to attend El Redentor, “one of the best schools in Bani,” where Beli sees “pale eyes gnawing at her duskiness like locusts” (85). In several ways, Beli evokes Stephen. To observe how these characters are closely tied, we need to draw on the scene where Joyce’s hero proposes his famous declaration, “I will not serve,” which is addressed to his friend Cranly while attending college:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning. (Joyce, *A Portrait* 268-69)

In the passage where Stephen professes his intention to leave the Church, Ireland, and his family, he declares that he will take the risk of being an outsider by following his own path. The promise of Stephen is repeated by the adolescent Beli in *Oscar Wao*. For Beli, she falls for Jack Pujols, the “number one” son of a colonel for Trujillo (104). However, her first love lets her recognize “the fragility of love and the preternatural cowardice of men” (107) when one day the headmaster detects Beli having sex with Jack at school, and the ensuing scandal leads him to deny his love for her. Disillusioned with her first love, Beli makes her first adult oath:

I will not serve. Never again would she follow any lead other than her own. Not the rector’s, not the nuns’, not La Inca’s, not her poor dead parents’. Only me, she whispered. Me. (107)

These two passages are obviously similar to one another. When Díaz renders in Beli the words of Stephen, he might intend to expose both similarities and differences between each character. Not only does Stephen’s last name remind us of Daedalus, the creator inventing the wings to break the clutches of the Minotaur on the island of Create, but he also resolves to be an artist by breaking his imprisonment. In *Oscar Wao*, Beli desires to transcend the social conditions suppressing her independence. The novel also emphasizes Beli’s creative impulse, revealing her inclination to invent stories. The narrator implies her capability of creating stories: “What a world she spun! Beli talked of parties and pools and polo games and dinners where bloody steak was heaped onto plates and grapes were as common as tangerines. She in fact, without knowing, was talking about the life she never knew” (89). To gain moments of freedom within the confined setting, the heroine plays the raconteur, thereby replacing her harsh reality with a more acceptable space.

Despite such parallels between Stephen and Beli, the enormous gulf between them is displayed in *Oscar Wao*. Both characters go into exile, followed by a dramatic moment that triggers their significant transition, but the nature of their epiphanies differs: while Stephen experiences a moment of aesthetic epiphany, Beli undergoes a physical transformation after the experience of being beaten. In the case of *A Portrait*, Stephen decides to exile himself after experiencing a sequence of positive transitions over the course of the novel. During his years at school, separate from other boys, Stephen becomes a bookish thinker who meditates on God, the cosmos, and his own human nature. As a Catholic, Stephen is racked with guilt after having sex with the prostitute, and repents his sin after listening to Father Arnall’s sermon about death and hell. Stephen wonders if he could be a priest, but instead of entering a Jesuit school, he attends a university where he develops his concept of beauty by adopting a philosophy of aestheticism. One day in college, Stephen encounters the moment of epiphany that leads him to become an artist. The moment occurs at a beach where Stephen is observing a wading girl who seems “likeone whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird” (Joyce *A Portrait*, 185). Reflecting upon his interpretation of the girl’s image, Stephen feels as though he has acquired an aesthetic inspiration from within. He cries, “Heavenly God!” in “an outburst of profane joy” (Joyce *A Portrait*, 186). The scene comprises one of Joyce’s many epiphanies, by which Stephen experiences “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Joyce *Stephen Hero*, 211). The epiphany remains the happiest moment for Stephen. He receives the epiphanic experience as a calling to be an artist, and subsequently begins his journey into exile. Considering exile a course to be followed by the modern artist, the hero departs from Dublin. The sudden revelation of beauty when observing the girl empowers him to become an aesthetic subject who can now take on the risk of being an outsider.

In *Oscar Wao*, Beli meets an epiphanic revelation after making her first adult oath. Since declaring her decision for self-reliance, the heroine quits school and falls in love with a middle aged man, called the Gangster, who approaches her while she is working at a restaurant, and turns out to be the husband of Trujillo’s sister. After having the Gangster’s baby, Beli expects him to marry her, but instead, two officers of Trujillo’s Secret Police kidnap her. In the cane field they beat her “like she was a dog” (153). This is the moment when a sudden manifestation occurs to Beli. Knocked down in the cane, she perceives a mongoose, which appears to her, and speaks, “*You have to rise*” (155; emphasis original). Though triggering Beli’s transnational diaspora, the moment of violence is utterly devoid of aesthetic pleasures appearing in the context of Joyce. While Stephen’s epiphany arouses emotional impact, Beli’s moment is engendered through physical destruction. As a consequence of the moment, her body undergoes a transformation: “five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out” (153). The moment, which “contains specific acts of inflicting pain” (Scarry 27), makes Beli fail to protect her unborn child and decide to be “a new person” in another place: planning to leave Santo Domingo, she vows, “I never want to see it again” (170).

Beli’s diaspora is an involuntary exile resulting from physical and emotional trauma whereas Stephen’s is a voluntary exile propelled by the spiritual manifestation of beauty. After a brief trip to Paris, Stephen has returned to Dublin at the beginning of *Ulysses* (1922). As David Pierce notes, Joyce’s novel conveys the idea that “home is where the heart is” (23), no matter how eagerly the text embraces the artist’s journey to exile. Voluntary exile allows Stephen to freely return home if he wants. Although Dublin emerges as a suffocating place for Stephen, he nevertheless acquires brief moments of liberation through epiphanies, and keeps pursuing his self-achievement within a confined space. On the other hand, Beli emerges as the object of a dramatic transformation rather than an autonomous subject discovering her individual belief and purpose. She enters the frame where she is “much changed” (166).

It is worth emphasizing that the critical incident deprives Beli of words, which mark her creative potential. Trapped in the realm of silence and amnesia, the trauma in Santo Domingo annihilates her voice. According to Elaine Scarry, a subject’s “voice becomes a final source of self-extension” in that “so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundary of the body, [and] occupies a space much larger than the body” (33). As a consequence of the infliction of physical pain, Beli has lost her voice, what Scarry considers “a final source of self-extension” (33). For forty years while living in New Jersey, Beli never leaks “word one about that period of her life,” and embraces “the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands” (269). When the transformation of Beli’s body occurs, her voice and words collapse, which suggests her subsequent loss of agency as a storyteller.

By drawing an intertextual parallel between Beli and Stephen, Díaz relates the two characters in order to enlarge the gap between them. In her critical moment of epiphany, Beli’s position is displaced from the observer to the observed. In doing so, Díaz’s text challenges the mode of Stephen’s epiphany as a sudden spiritual manifestation of beauty. Rather than a spiritual revelation, a physical manifestation occurs within Beli. This altered mode of epiphany also reaches Oscar, who recognizes that “his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends” are “embarrassed by him” (30). The narrator terms Oscar’s sudden realization as an epiphany, an epiphany echoing through “his fat self” (30). Like Beli, at the moment of epiphany, Oscar finds himself under the gaze of others. Through the recreation of the mode of epiphany, Díaz implies the difficulty of securing even a brief moment of liberation for his characters.

In Joyce’s novel, Stephen establishes his ethos of detachment during his excursion to Paris. Referred to as “Telemachus” by the author, Stephen in *Ulysses* is related to Leopold Bloom, who takes on the role of his spiritual father after returning to Dublin. For example, the “Eumaeus” episode portrays how father and son are united. Bloom finds Stephen in the street, knocked down by Carr to protect the honor of the king after Stephen announces his intent to mentally subvert both priest and king. Bloom helps Stephen compose himself, and takes him to a “cabman’s shelter,” a coffeehouse where they begin to converse about love and politics (Joyce *Ulysses*, 508). Conversely, no one rescues Beli: her escape to the United States immediately transfers her to another imprisonment. In New Jersey, she has two jobs while raising Oscar and Lola and suffering from the betrayals of husband (172). What Beli encounters in the new territory is “the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorias” and “the loneliness of Diaspora” (172). While rethinking Joyce’s literary representation, Díaz’s novel accomplishes a political purpose by exposing the hardship of diasporic subjects. Furthermore, Díaz’s reaction to the Joycean mode of epiphany reflects his creative impulse to inscribe original signs in his text, instead of reiterating the preceding mode of representation.

**The Anxiety of Imitation**

Although Beli’s diaspora makes her escape from the dictator’s regime possible, her exile imitates the restructuring of the territory from which she departed. In the course of recreating her life in New Jersey, Beli establishes the micro-politics of the nation-state governed by Trujillo in the domestic sphere. Rather than avoiding “the influence of the nation-state” or “the institutional violence and ideology of dictatorship” (Sáez 526), Beli subconsciously imitates the Trujillato while forcing her children to accommodate Dominican gender stereotypes: sexual competency for males and submissiveness for females. While Beli abuses Oscar for staying at home, telling him, “You ain’t a woman to be saying in the house” (23), she obligates her daughter to be a “perfect Dominican daughter,” what Lola calls a “perfect Dominican Slave” (58). Beli’s strategy of “forging” herself and her family thus parallels Trujillo’s methods of shaping the nation and its history (Hanna 506). By reproducing oppressive power structures, Beli recalls Trujillo’s regime governed by power, regulation, and manipulation in the domestic sphere.

The problem of being recaptured also overwhelms Lola and Oscar. They separate themselves from an oppressive domain which sustains cultural ideologies, but cannot achieve a successful escape. In her narration of “Wildwood,” the novel’s second chapter, Lola dreams of “the life that exist[s] beyond Paterson, beyond [her] family, beyond Spanish” (56, 57). Lola’s process of escape begins with her imagination of going abroad. As a child, Lola wishes that her Japanese penpal’s parents would adopt her (58). Growing up, she aspires to escape the domestic sphere and the local culture that strives to “incorporate the individual within national and ethnic definitions” (Mermann-Jozwiak 2). Lola wants to transcend a particular location in place and time so that her mother “would have passed” her “on the street” and “never recognized” her (215). Desiring the removal of particular cultural aspects, she hopes to reinvent herself as a transnational subject getting beyond any cultural frame.

Lola’s opportunity for escape is realized at the age of fourteen: she sees her mother’s breast cancer as a chance to run away from her. In seeking to escape her mother’s control, Lola spends an increasing amount of time in the town of Wildwood, where her boyfriend Aldo lives with his father. To further her transgressive action against filial obligation and cultural norms, Lola stays at Wildwood for a period of three months, but she begins to look for another place when Aldo tells his friends a racist joke in front of her. It is then that Dublin enters Lola’s mind as an imagined space where she could fulfill her dream. Setting Dublin as her next destination, Lola prepares herself for the trip: she telephones Oscar, and asks him to bring her belongings and money. Gazing out the window at a coffee shop, she daydreams what will happen in the imagined space:

I was going to convince my brother to run away with me. My plan was that we would go to Dublin. I had met a bunch of Irish guys on the boardwalk and they had sold me on their country. I would become a backup singer for U2, and both Bono and the drummer would fall in love with me, and Oscar could become the Dominican James Joyce. I really believed it would happen too. That’s how deluded I was by then. (71)

Although Lola’s wandering creates a brief moment of liberation, her excursion soon leads to her imprisonment. The next day, Oscar shows up with Beli in front of him. Lola rejoins her family, and is forced to stay at Santo Domingo for six months, a pedagogical method designed by Beli to discipline her daughter (73). As Lola remarks, what she eventually finds is that running away is impossible because “the only way out is in” (215).

When Lola dreams that Oscar would become the Dominican James Joyce in Dublin, she might recognize that, although some similarities exist between Oscar and Joyce, she must confess the false analogy. Lola’s awareness of the impossibility of being the Dominican James Joyce, in fact, overlaps with the consciousness of Díaz, who might conceive that contemporary American nerds would find it difficult to sustain the values of Joyce such as rebellion associated with the creation of language. Although the text constructs the author’s former self through portraying Oscar, internalizing contradictions in young Díaz, it suggests the gap between the author and the hero who attaches himself to the American superhero fictions, and repeats the language of others, rather than promoting his own style. Díaz perceives that the advantage of a nerd (as in an atypical and countercultural nerd) lies in becoming a nonconformist who can create language, stand alone, and challenge a social system. While Stephen and Abelard emerge as aesthetic and political rebels who challenge imperial institutions that exert castrating forces over them, Oscar remains an imitator adopting the language of symbolic fathers.

In one sense, Oscar breaks from the ethnic community where he belongs in pursuit of a sense of freedom. Stigmatized as an outsider, Oscar confronts physical and emotional attacks from Dominican-Americans as well as white American kids who “looked at his black skin and afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness” (51). Yunior, a Dominican immigrant and Oscar’s roommate at Rutgers, seeks to draw distinctions between them. Wanting to hide his own “otakuness” (22), Yunior emphasizes his difference from Oscar by self-fashioning himself as a sexually charming male “who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time” and “who could bench 340 pounds” (192, 176). In escaping the Dominican gender ideology, Oscar enters the world of fiction, including the novels of Tom Swift, Lovecraft, and the comic books that constitute the Marvel universe. Unlike other Dominican American peers, Oscar spends most of his time reading and writing. However, Oscar’s escape from one domain immediately creates another imprisonment. In fleeing from the Dominican subgroup, he is running towards the cultural group of nerds that comprises a number of American teenagers, or fan-boys, obsessed with SF fictions, comic books, TV series, and role-playing games, what Yunior simply calls “Genres.” From his childhood, Oscar has unwittingly trained to become a “young nerd—the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched *Ultraman*” (19). In high school, “his commitment to the Genres becomes absolute” (21).

Scholars often propose that Oscar’s acting a nerd enables him to be a rebellious outsider who overturns the mainstream culture. Drawing on Bucholtz’s study, Finn’s reading of *Oscar Wao* argues that Oscar differs from those who practice hyperwhite performance in that he employs the “marginal” texts that help him transgress the established cultural boundaries (5). Furthermore, regarding the Genres as the “rejected” text in the field of literature (513), Hanna suggests that Oscar’s use of the fantasies, comic books, and role-playing games serve to oppose the mainstream culture, thereby making him a rebellious outsider. Similarly, Daniel Bautista describes the Genres as the texts that are constructed on loosely organized frames: he argues that such texts give Oscar the flexible lens of reality. While emphasizing the significant functions of the Genres, the scholars have ignored that the novel embeds the layers of sarcasm towards Oscar’s relationship to the texts. By consuming the Genres and establishing his identity within the American youth group that seems “both ideologically gendered (male) and racialized (white)” during the 1980s (Bucholtz 85), Oscar takes on the collective tastes constructing the typical American nerds “who, as the eighties marched on, developed a growing obsession with the end of World” (23-24).

According to Mary Bucholtz, during the eighties and the nineties, white male nerds, considered both “social underachievers” and “intellectual overachievers,” separated themselves “from both the practices and the stances of trendier youth,” and embraced “the values of nerdiness, primarily intelligence” (85). The nerds took part in “hyperwhite” performance by employing a “superstandard English,” marked as being “too white” because “the notion of a linguistic standard which in the U.S. context is bound up with whiteness” (Bucholtz 87-88). In choosing nerdiness, current slang and African American vernacular English were self-consciously avoided by white male teenagers: they hoped to distinguish themselves from “cool” teenagers in order to present their intellectual superiority (Bucholtz 88). Oscar imitates the group’s collective tastes and manners, but he remains “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite,” termed by Homi Bhaba to describe a colonial subject who has undergone a partial change in the context of colonialism. Bhaba argues that the colonizers demand the colonized to take on their tastes and manners in an effort to reform them; yet, the colonizers make the colonized imitate their tastes and manners only “partially” because the colonizers do not want the colonized to enter the circle of privilege they alone occupy (122). The consequence of that mimicry is that the colonial subject is differentiated as a recognized Other who is almost the same, but not quite (Bhaba 123).[[8]](#endnote-8) Oscar’s obsession with the Genres makes him similar to other members of the group. Nonetheless, he becomes a recognized Other who is “almost” an American nerd, but “not quite” because of his visible Dominicanness. The dormitory Demarest at Rutgers, depicted by Yunior as “Demarest Homo Hall” where anyone may encounter “a little white artist freak” (176), emblematizes Oscar’s ambivalent position. Oscar consumes the Genres just as any other “white artist freak”; however, Oscar is segregated from the mainstream nerds because he is inevitably singled out among the members of the group. While Oscar is differentiated within the group of white American nerds, he participates in what Bucholtz calls hyperwhite performance by employing “a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like indefatigable and ubiquitous when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school” (23). Oscar’s production of superstandard language hints that he seeks to separate himself from the African American boys, and profits a sense of privilege through this linguistic strategy.

What is absent from Oscar is his own distinctive use of language. Imitating the words of superheroes and non-human characters appearing in the Genres, Oscar speaks as if he were “a Star Trek computer” (179), and employs Elvish, the foreign language used in *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien. At Rutgers, he posts on the dormitory room door the language of Tolkien, greeting his peers with the Elvish word for friend (“mellon”) (I78). Oscar’s attachment to the Genres seems rarely conducive to employing a tactic of countercultural practice. In assuming the role of an American nerd, Oscar falls into a trap where he confuses fiction and reality. To “the deep structures in [Oscar’s] deep nerd brain,” as Yunior remarks, the terror of Trujillo appears as a “very attractive” fiction (255). Through the narrator’s voice, Díaz indicates the possibility that these hero texts function as a fixed frame for a reader like Oscar. The novel alludes to a comparison between the Trujillato and an episode of *Twilight Zone*, one of Oscar’s favorite TV shows, where “the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the word” (232). This account then implies the link between “the monstrous white kid” in *Twilight Zone* and the militarist Trujillo “bleaching” his skin with face whiteners (2). Compared to the totalitarian regime of the Trujillato, the Genres imprison Oscar into the textual frame where he draws on the fictions as the ultimate source of self, and collapses the boundary between fiction and reality, which, in turn, suggests that he is too distant from reality to become the cultural rebel capable of destabilizing the rigid frame of society.

Unlike in *A Portrait* in which Stephen is developed through exile, the act of withdrawing from active engagement with the social world, the hero in *Oscar Wao* exposes the impossibility of such a development by means of exile. Haunted by “the whisper that “*You do not belong*,” one that “all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves” (286), Oscar finds no place for his wish-fulfillment except the fictional frame that serves to reify hegemonic ideology: he cannot “figure his way out of it” (278). Oscar’s exile towards the Genres is an almost forced exile originated from the problem of the Dominican diaspora. It becomes an obstacle to the development towards a subversive nerd, manifested through Joyce as an artist and iconoclast, one who threatens to undermine one dominant culture through tactical detachment and resistance.

Díaz implies Oscar’s development, but complicates it by having him unconsciously imitate the language of American superheroes even at the moment when he internally desires to transcend the fictional realm. Oscar’s unconscious imitation of the superheroes culminates in the scene of the cane field by the end of the novel in which many of the elements during the depiction of the attack on Beli recur. During Joaquin Balaguer’s third government, Oscar travels to Santo Domingo and falls for the Dominican prostitute Ybón, the girlfriend of a member of the Secret Police, called Capitán. The capitán and another policeman kidnap Oscar and beat him in the cane field as punishment for having taken Ybón as a lover. After his beating and his consequent return to New Jersey, Oscar goes back to Santo Domingo to court Ybón, and succeeds in spending twenty-seven days with her until the capitán takes him to the cane field to murder him. As Oscar’s final letter reveals, the experience of mutual love invites him to realize the beauty of “the little intimacies” like Ybón combing her hair, or walking naked to the bathroom, or sitting on his lap (344). This awareness could have facilitated Oscar’s artistic development by prompting his exile from the fictional terrain, but it cannot be accomplished, since he is killed before transforming the lived experience into creative writing. Confronting the capitán and his friend, Oscar challenges the violence of the men by trying to “stand bravely” (331), and delivers a formal address to the policemen. Projecting himself onto Uatu the Watcher, the *Fantastic Four*’s character, and sending a telegraphic message to all the women he has ever loved, Oscar strives to convey his message to the Dominican policemen in Spanish. He makes a long speech, his “words coming out like they belonged to someone else,” in which he warns his attackers that if they kill him, he will return to their children as a “hero” and an “avenger” to take revenge (331-32).

Regarding this encounter, Ann Garland Mahler claims that Oscar’s confrontation with the aggressors allows him to achieve “his dream of becoming a hero, or transforming into ‘the incredible Oscar Wao’” in that his action functions to create “a narrative of courageous martyrdom in which he risks his life of love” (129). Admittedly, Oscar acquires some moments of transformation since finding the real object of love; however, it seems exaggerated to argue that Oscar embodies the author’s imagination of aesthetic progress that coincides with political subversion. As I have suggested above, Díaz finds it crucial to engage more than one dominant language in creating a text: he considers the text of this kind both aesthetically distinctive and politically subversive. While Oscar’s speech registers a gesture towards cultural allegiance in that, at the very least, he speaks in Spanish, it also displays Oscar dissolving into the language of American superheroes that appear in the Genres operated by a set of clichés and stereotypical images, thereby inhibiting a proliferation of meanings.[[9]](#endnote-9) Divergent from the aesthetic foundation of the novel, Oscar’s speech cannot exceed the confines of the Genres, which the author’s persona rather pejoratively describes as “the zeitgeist” during “the Nerd Age” in a footnote of the novel (22).

Becoming the Dominican James Joyce is what Lola dreams for Oscar. Lola’s desire in turn alludes to Díaz’s aspiration towards an artist enjoying his freedom by means of exile. To be an artist, according to both Díaz and Joyce, one must be willing to transgress the domestic and national boundaries that strive to foster a homogeneous identity. As a pioneer in the tradition of literary modernism, Joyce rejects existing conventions of language and taste. Like Joyce, Díaz seeks to create his own language in defiance of the dominant culture. Although Díaz shares these literary elements with Joyce, he recognizes the particular cultural context in which diasporic subjects are blocked from following the path of Joyce’s hero. Trapped in social frames, the novel’s characters, who bear the seeds of creativity, tend to imitate the language of others without recognizing that their mimicry recaptures them. The consequence of this awareness is that Díaz distances himself from Joyce, and highlights the difficulties of those aspirations towards exile, which can be so forbidding to the Dominican American heroes.

Notes

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1. Hanna argues that *Oscar Wao* describes “historical reconstructions” of Dominican history (498). López-Calvo frames the novel within “the tradition of the novel of the Latin American dictator and, in particular, within the narrative cycle about the Trujillato” (75). Sáez contends that Díaz makes *Oscar Wao* a medium to embody the diversity of the Dominican American diaspora (522-23). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For example, Dara E. Goldman argues that like Joyce, “Díaz builds his stories by weaving together the voices of different, interrelated characters.” Asserting that Díaz sets his works within “transnational frameworks, frameworks that shatter the self-inflicted, deprecating Latino stereotype so prevalent in American culture,” Carlos Bakota compares Díaz to Joyce: *Oscar Wao* “takes Joyce as a sort of model to free himself from the constraints of the Eurocentric canon” (Bakota). These are reviews posted on scholarly websites. So far, I have not found comparisons to Díaz and Joyce in academic journals or books. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. All subsequent references to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will be indicated with the abbreviation *A Portrait*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This kind of reaction to the precursor reminds me of the “counter-sublime” or “daemonization,” which Harold Bloom identifies as the fourth stage in developing originality for a new writer who has been under the influence of predecessors. In *The* *Influence of Anxiety* (1973), Bloom suggests that new writers find their creative inspiration in previous writers and imitate their style, but strong writers seek to escape from the precursor’s influence in order to develop their original style. In the process, they deliberately misread the preceding texts of their precursors and recreate them. Bloom identifies this reaction as the “counter-sublime” or “daemonization.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This acknowledgment is found in an anonymous interview, held in 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This conversation appears in an interview by Edwidge Dandicat. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This sentence comes from “The Wandering Rocks” of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (280). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. According to Bhaba, the colonial subject’s mimicry challenges the dominant power of the colonizers because that mimicry differentiates the colonial subject as an Other, and therefore discloses the hypocrisy of the colonizers. I admit that Díaz’s novel becomes a subversive space because it reveals the disturbing reality of Oscar who occupies the ambivalent position. However, Oscar’s mimicry seldom encourages the character’s promotion of creativity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a discussion of negative impacts of the Genres, for example, see Benjamin Nugent’s *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (2008). Nugent argues that the systems encoded in the fantasy genres and role-playing games direct against proliferations of meanings. Nugent focuses on the structure of “Dungeons & Dragons,” a fantasy-role playing game designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, and presented as Oscar’s favorite role-playing game in *Oscar Wao*. According to Nugent, D&D is a fantasy game that consists “entirely of a love triangle between two of the players’ characters and a shared object of desire,” and fosters “male competitiveness” (46-47). His point is that such a text tends to limit its user’s ability to imagine and interpret. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)