

Invoking Joyce, Avoiding Imitation:
Junot Díaz's Portrait of Nerds in
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
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Abstract: There are several hints in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) that Junot Díaz has been more influenced by Irish modernist James Joyce than he declares. As a modernist, Joyce emphasized the importance of detachment and disobedience to the ethos of the modern artist. He felt it was significant for an artist to innovate his own language because doing so invites new aesthetic styles and engenders political resistance to the dominant culture. Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides an exposition of how an aesthetic pursuit coincides with a political rebellion against British imperialism. This article argues that, for these reasons, Joyce is an important precursor to Díaz. I read Díaz's novel alongside Joyce's and offer textual sites that suggest Joyce's influence on Díaz. In doing so, I demonstrate that Díaz values and inherits Joyce's literary style while modifying some of his modes. Focusing on the link between Díaz and Joyce can expand our understanding of Díaz's work and place a new emphasis on his connection with the Irish modernist.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, James Joyce, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, nerd, imitation

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) is the tale of Oscar de León and his family, who emigrated 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. *Oscar*

Wao unveils the political terror of the Trujillato and recounts the tyranny of the Dominican dictatorship by outlining how Trujillo's evil force haunts the De León-Cabral family across three generations and uproots them from their homeland. Many critics place the novel in the context of the Caribbean, Latin American, African, or Dominican literary diaspora. However, this scholarship tends to assign *Oscar Wao* to the category of United States ethnic literature and thus reduce the novel to a project primarily interested in ending the curse of colonialism. For example, Monica Hanna, Ignacio López-Calvo, and Elena Machado Sáez each situate *Oscar Wao* as a fiction written for a Dominican American audience.¹ Similarly, Richard Perez argues that Díaz aims to destroy the Dominican curse, called *fukú* and embodied in the novel by the Trujillato, by means of the act of writing, or *zafa*.

This emphasis on Díaz's Dominican background has led to a discussion of his association with Latin American or diasporic writers or writers of color who occupy the place of the racial Other. Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist, and Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott, whose poem "The Schooner's Flight" (1980) is one of Díaz's epigraphs to *Oscar Wao*, are the most frequently mentioned influences on Díaz. Pamela J. Rader, for instance, links Rushdie and Díaz by suggesting that, like Rushdie, Díaz reinvents history through fiction and turns "national and impersonal" accounts into personal histories (5). Óscar Ortega Montero and Grant Glass, among others, draw on Díaz's use of Walcott's poem, in which the poet says, "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me" (Walcott 346), to suggest that *Oscar Wao* presents Díaz's self-formed Latin American diasporic identity. Such readers argue that Díaz's citation of Walcott's poem, which they regard as an embodiment of "the Caribbean melting pot" (Ortega Montero 10), aligns *Oscar Wao* with the poet's engagement of ethnic identities. Similarly, López-Calvo provides an intertextual reading of *Oscar Wao* that links Díaz to Gabriel García Márquez, a Latin American magical realist, and Mario Vargas Llosa, a Peruvian magical realist and author of *The Feast of the Goat* (2001), a novel about the Trujillato. Lopez-Calvo suggests that Díaz adopts the role of a "native informant" affected by Latin American magical realists (75) and examines Díaz's self-conscious association with those precursors.

The purpose of this article is not to engage with the critical reception that links Díaz to Latin American, Caribbean, or African diasporic writers. Rather, this article explores the possibilities of an intertextual reading of *Oscar Wao* and the fiction of early twentieth-century Irish modernist James Joyce, a seemingly distant precursor who does not belong to any of the ethnic, national, or racial categories often used to demarcate Díaz. With the exception of a few reviews of *Oscar Wao*, most scholarly criticism has ignored any literary influence Joyce may have had on Díaz.² In “Revenge of the Nerd: Junot Díaz and the Network of American Literary Imagination” (2011), Ed Finn enlarges the scope of the existing criticism by suggesting an extensive range of influencers such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Haas, and Don DeLillo, but although he modifies the critical tendency to categorize Díaz as a diasporic writer of color he 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 Joyce’s complex influence on the writing of *Oscar Wao* as well as Díaz’s detachment from Joyce.

An intertextual reading of Díaz’s and Joyce’s work dissociates Díaz from narrow categories, thereby helping us rethink his work. This approach illuminates Díaz’s emphasis on the nonconformist’s yearning for unbelonging and desire to escape domestic or national ties, primary desires present in Joyce’s work. Díaz inherits Joyce’s defense of the artist’s rejection of social conformity and embraces the notion of presenting a character’s desire for unbelonging as a countercultural gesture that undermines solid societal frameworks. As I will describe, the subjects of *Oscar Wao* echo Stephen Dedalus, the aesthetic protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Joyce’s semi-autobiographical fiction in which Stephen, a creative artist struggling to invent his own language, adheres to a long-established ethos of detachment and resistance.³ In adapting Joyce’s literary modes and themes, however, Díaz also engenders new meanings that create distance between Joyce’s hero and his own characters and thus affirms his detachment from Joyce. I first describe why Joyce is Díaz’s critically unmentioned but important precursor by drawing on his interviews and comparing *Oscar Wao* and *A Portrait*. My discussion speculates on how Díaz reacts to the Joycean

style, which, in turn, proves his desire for originality as a creative writer.⁴ Finally, I argue that Díaz's characters, especially Oscar, have difficulty sustaining the core facets of Joycean heroes while acting as imitators of a dominant culture rather than aesthetic innovators, the political rebels identified by both Díaz and Joyce.

I. Díaz's Joyce as a Model of the Aesthetic and Political Rebel

In interviews, Díaz names Rushdie and Toni Morrison as his most influential predecessors (Jenkins 17). He mentions appreciating the influence of Jack Kirby, Los Bros Hernandez, Samuel R. Delany, Edward Rivera, Octavia Butler, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, Stephen King, Arundhati Roy, Haruki Murakami, and others ("Interview"). In an interview, Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian American author of *The Farming of Bones* (1998), a novel about the Trujillo period and the 1937 massacre of Haitian emigrants, recognized a stylistic affinity between Díaz and Joyce and asked Díaz: "Does Junot Díaz, minimalist in *Drown* and definitely Joycean here, dream of being the Dominican James Joyce?" Díaz responded: "I'm a Joyce fanatic—the Irish have had a colonial relationship with the English for a long, long time and that's one reason they're so useful to immigrant writers of color in the US" ("Junot Díaz"). Yet he also distanced himself from Joyce: "I don't dream of being Joyce any more than I dream of being Jack Kirby," the comic book artist famous for *The Fantastic Four* ("Junot Díaz"). Díaz dismisses Joyce to the periphery, although he hints that his attachment to Joyce is more complex than his feelings for Kirby. In doing so, Díaz intimates his motivation to detach himself from Joyce, even if he remains a Joyce fanatic.

In contrast to his complicated relationship with Joyce, Díaz's kinship with Kirby is quite obvious. The 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 in both the Dominican subculture and mainstream white American society (qtd. in Danticat). Like the X-Men, considered both outsiders and superheroes, Díaz occupied a marginal position and

relied on an inner source of strength. In a footnote to *Oscar Wao*, 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" (Díaz 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 who embody an experience that parallels his own life in the genre of comic books that he identifies as "the narrative margins" (qtd. in Danticat). Díaz's awareness of being marginal unambiguously ties him to Kirby and explains his lack of hesitancy in revering the comic book artist.

Díaz's relationship with Joyce, however, is far from simple. This does not simply mean that Díaz has conflicting feelings about him that are as extreme as love and hatred or admiration and contempt. We can recognize the complexity even when he openly proclaims his attachment to Joyce. In pointing out Joyce's strength, Díaz associates him with a distinctive and valued Irishness apart from European influence. Díaz's statement invites us to presume that he is evaluating Joyce solely as a political activist writing on behalf of his nation. However, I suggest that Díaz's Joyce is not simply an Irish nationalist but a creative artist whose play with language generates aesthetic effects seemingly unrelated to political thoughts. For instance, Díaz shows an appreciation for Joyce's aesthetic innovation in a statement in which he introduces his favorite line from *Ulysses* (1922): "He walked by the treeshade of sunnyninking leaves" (qtd. in Anderson).⁵ Díaz remarks that the sentence "contains much of what [he] love[s] in Joyce: the hoppity rhythms, the juggling of vowels (ee, aw, I, eh, ee, ay, uh, uh, ee, ih, ih, ee), 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" (qtd. in Anderson). He finds Joyce's use of words artistic and is fascinated by the precursor's play with language, which produces aesthetic effects by arousing a sense of both 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, both authors consider these aspects to be entwined rather than disconnected. 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 that involve an act of imagination. In *A Portrait*, for example, Joyce presents the political potential awakened by a schoolboy's daydreaming. At school, Stephen's mind wanders from his attempt to solve an 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. Stephen is aware of the impossibility of a green rose, but his daydream allows him to envision that "perhaps somewhere in the world you could [have such a rose]" (9). As Rebecca L. Walkowitz cogently argues, Stephen's temporary distraction constructs a replacement of "the cold utility of the schoolroom with the pleasure of artifice—a nonexistent rose" (67). Stephen's emotional wandering establishes his ethos as an artist and anti-colonialist. Refusing social conformity, he chooses the freedom of wandering, which provides him with a "momentary escape" as well as a critical reflection on the "institutions in which he has been asked to participate" (Walkowitz 67, 64). The green rose of his daydream also signifies independent Ireland.

Joyce's writing rejects the idea of serving English colonialism by portraying an artist who "resists a siren call from England" through his questioning of the use of language (Riquelme 106). An episode in *A Portrait* elucidates how Stephen's questioning of language generates anti-colonial sentiment toward England's imperial dominance. 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"; although he references the same object, the Englishman cannot understand what he is talking about. The dean asks: "Is that called a tundish in Ireland?" (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" (204). The dean's paro-

chial attitude provokes Stephen's consciousness of his Irish identity. The narrator observes that "[t]he 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" (205). Stephen realizes that the language in which they are speaking is "*his* before it is *mine*" (205; emphasis added). He continues: "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 be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words" (205). In questioning whether he can accept the language of the English as his own, Stephen develops his sense of anti-colonialism. His challenge to the imperial dominance of Standard English highlights Joyce's rejection of the dominance of one superior culture. It also betrays Joyce's anxiety of imitation. Just as Stephen draws a distinction between "his" (the English dean's) language and "mine" (his own), Joyce seeks to promote the "mode of English appropriate for Irish experience" (Deane 31).

Díaz shares Joyce's anxiety about imitating the so-called first language. His efforts in *Oscar Wao* to create a high degree of verbal play correspond to Joyce's efforts to engage more than one dominant language. In the novel, Díaz mixes heterogeneous voices and multiple linguistic codes, including non-standard English, untranslated Spanish, and Spanish slang. By inserting various languages into his English narrative, Díaz creates a polyvocal space that dismantles a "single voice" encouraged by "totalitarian categories of discourse" (Patterson 12). Díaz 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 is an analogue for Díaz: they are both aesthetic innovators who emphasize the political effects that result from the creation of language. Like Joyce, Díaz recognizes and values the way that an aesthetic subject's resistance makes room for creativity and heterogeneity.

Joyce's Stephen, an ostensibly apolitical hero, is a cultural transgressor against British imperialism. Stephen's political resistance works not through direct participation in social activities but through consistent

involvement in aesthetic activities such as the exploration of language. Stephen refuses to take collective action and demands the freedom of being detached in order to resist the dominant culture. In addition, he respects his own taste, as presented in an episode in which he is mocked by a group of students for preferring Lord Byron, the English Romantic poet thought to be a “heretic,” rather than the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, an icon of English national identity whose work invokes conventional conformism to national ideals (Joyce, *A Portrait* 85). 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 64). Becoming an aesthetic heretic by rejecting British tastes demonstrates the power of Stephen’s political resistance to the dominant discourse, which has been shaped and sustained by the Empire.

To borrow Díaz’s term, Stephen can be affectionately described as a “nerd,” a nonconformist who chooses his path without caring what anyone thinks. In the American cultural context, a nerd is someone who is socially awkward, sexually inept, and bookish (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. As Francesca Jenkins notes, Díaz 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” (19). A footnote on the text clarifies what Díaz means by this term. He mentions Jesús de Galíndez, a Columbia University graduate student who wrote “a rather unsettling doctoral dissertation” about the Trujillato (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 100). Galíndez, “a loyalist in the Spanish Civil War” (100), took refuge in Santo Domingo in 1939 and, during this period, witnessed the terror of Trujillo. In wanting to expose the dictator’s reign of terror, Galíndez could not resist writing about him. 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” (qtd. in Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 100). From Crassweller’s description, Díaz coins his own term to ex-

plain the bookish rebel and refers to Galíndez as “a Basque super-nerd” (100). 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 Luis Cabral, “a brilliant doctor” and “a collector of rare books” who is “indefatigably curious, alarmingly prodigious, and especially suited for linguistic and computational complexity” (Díaz 221). Abelard seems afraid of confronting the Trujillato, a fear that earns him a “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 supposed indifference to the political regime, Abelard has been fighting against Trujillo all along. In 1937, when the Trujillato committed genocide against the Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans, “survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds” and Abelard “fixed them up as best as he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds” (223). He committed treason against the regime by operating on them. Abelard also damages Trujillo’s authority by writing a book about the regime in which he jokes about the dictator and argues that Trujillo is “if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world” (255). Although Abelard seems to avoid political activism, he manages to outwit and resist the political tyrant by means of his pen. The scribbler creates the *zafa*, or counterspell, to the forces of the *fukú* by illuminating the existence of the dictator’s violent power.

II. Díaz’s Discontent with a Mode of Aesthetic Epiphany

Beli Cabral, the “Third and Final Daughter of one of the Cibao’s finest families” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 84), is another member of Díaz’s circle of nerds who resist an oppressive regime. After Abelard is arrested in 1945, the orphaned Beli is forced to live with an abusive foster family until she is 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. Beli is raised by La Inca in Baní, a "city famed for its resistance to blackness" (80), but longs to escape from the older woman, 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 Baní," where Beli sees "pale eyes gnawing at her duskiness like locusts" (85). Beli evokes Stephen Dedalus in several ways. To observe how these characters are closely tied, we need to draw on the scene in which Joyce's hero addresses his friend Cranly: "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 in which 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. His promise is repeated by the adolescent Beli in *Oscar Wao*. Beli falls for Jack Pujols, the "number-one" son of one of Trujillo's colonels (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 104). However, she discovers "the fragility of love and the preternatural cowardice of men" (107) when the headmaster finds Beli having sex with Jack at school and the ensuing scandal leads Jack to deny his love for her. Disillusioned, Beli makes "her first adult oath, one that would follow her into adulthood, to the States and beyond" (107). She resolves not to "serve" anyone and refuses to "follow any lead other than her own" in order to respect herself (107).

Stephen's and Beli's oaths are obviously similar to one another. In having Beli echo Stephen's words, Díaz may intend to expose similarities and differences between the characters. Stephen recalls Daedalus, the mythical creator who invented wings to break away from the clutches of the Minotaur on Crete, in his name as well as his resolution to be an artist by breaking his imprisonment. Similarly, Beli wants to transcend the social conditions suppressing her independence. The novel also emphasizes her creative impulse by revealing her inclination to invent 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: the life of Casa Hatüey” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 89). To gain moments of freedom in her confined setting, she plays the raconteur, replacing her harsh reality with a more acceptable space.

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

In *Oscar Wao*, Beli’s epiphanic revelation occurs after making her first adult oath. Upon declaring that she will be self-reliant, she quits school and falls in love with a middle-aged man, the Gangster, who turns out

to be the husband of Trujillo's sister. When they have a baby, Beli expects him to marry her, but instead two officers of Trujillo's Secret Police kidnap her and take her to a cane field where they beat her "[l]ike she was a dog" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 153). In this moment, Beli has a vision. A mongoose appears and tells her, "*You have to rise*" (155; emphasis in original). Although the instance of violence leads to Beli's transnational movement, it is utterly devoid of the aesthetic pleasures that Stephen experiences. While his epiphany constitutes a moment of sublimity and transcendence, Beli's moment is engendered through physical destruction. As a consequence, her body undergoes a transformation: "[F]ive ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out" (153). This experience causes the loss of Beli's unborn child as well as additional physical damage and subsequently leads her to decide to be "a new person" (170) in another place. She plans to leave Santo Domingo and vows that she "never want[s] to see it again" (170).

Beli's involuntary exile results 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*. As David Pierce notes, Joyce's works, including *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, convey the idea that "home is where the heart is" (23), no matter how eagerly the texts embrace the artist's journey. Voluntary exile allows Stephen to freely return home if he wants. Although Dublin becomes a suffocating place for Stephen, he nevertheless acquires brief moments of liberation through epiphanies and continues to pursue his self-actualization in a confined space. Beli, however, is the object of a dramatic transformation rather than an autonomous subject discovering her individual belief and purpose. The physical pain Beli experiences in Santo Domingo annihilates her voice: it deprives her of the words that mark her creative potential. Over the forty years that she lives in New Jersey, Beli never leaks "word one about that period of her life" under the regime of the dictator whose tyranny involves the death of a subject's voice and instead embraces "the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 269). Her voice and words collapse when her body transforms, which anticipates 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 emphasize the gap between them. In her critical moment of epiphany, Beli's position is displaced from that of observer to that of the observed. Díaz's text thus challenges the mode of Stephen's epiphany as a sudden spiritual manifestation of beauty. Rather than a spiritual revelation, a physical experience overwhelms Beli. Oscar also experiences this altered mode of epiphany when he recognizes that "his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends" are "embarrassed by *him*" (30; emphasis in original). The narrator terms Oscar's sudden realization "an epiphany that echo[s] throughout his fat self" (30). Like Beli, Oscar finds himself under the gaze of others in his epiphanic moment. By recreating the mode of epiphany, Díaz implies the difficulty his characters have in achieving liberation.

In *A Portrait*, Stephen establishes his ethos of detachment during his excursion to Paris. Referred to as "Telemachus" by Joyce, 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 US immediately transfers her to another imprisonment. In New Jersey, she maintains two jobs while raising Oscar and Lola and suffering the betrayals of her husband. She encounters "the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías" and "the loneliness of Diaspora" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 171–72). *Oscar Wao* rethinks Joyce's literary representation of Stephen's moment of spiritual awakening and exposes the particular hardships of diasporic subjects.

III. The Anxiety of Imitation

In the course of establishing her life in New Jersey, Beli is not free from the gender norms sustained by the Dominican immigrants. By forc-

ing her children to accommodate Dominican gender stereotypes such as sexual aggression for men and submissiveness for women, Beli uses violence to enforce Dominican gender norms. While Beli abuses Oscar for staying at home, telling him, “You ain’t a woman to be staying in the house” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 23), she requires her daughter to be a “perfect Dominican daughter,” what Lola calls a “perfect Dominican Slave” (58). Lola attempts to separate herself from her mother, but she cannot successfully escape. In Lola’s narration of “Wildwood,” the novel’s second chapter, she dreams of “[t]he life that exist[s] beyond Paterson, beyond [her] family, beyond Spanish” (57). Her escape process begins with her vision of going abroad, which shows her as escaping both her immigrant community’s culture and American ethnic politics. As a child, she wishes that her Japanese pen pal’s parents would adopt her. 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 fully that even her mother would not recognize her (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 215). She hopes to escape the domestic sphere and tries to reinvent herself as a transnational subject who exists beyond rigid cultural boundaries.

Lola realizes her opportunity for escape at age fourteen when 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. She stays for three months but 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 can fulfill her dream. She telephones Oscar and asks him to bring her belongings and money. Gazing out the window at a coffee shop, she daydreams about 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)

Lola's mental wandering creates a brief moment of liberation, but her excursion soon leads to her imprisonment. The next day, Oscar shows up with Beli. Lola rejoins her family and is forced to stay in Santo Domingo for six months, a pedagogical exercise designed by Beli to discipline her daughter. Lola eventually finds that "you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that's what I guess these stories are all about" (215).

Although Lola's analogy between Oscar and Joyce is false, it is worth noting that she considers the possibility and impossibility of Oscar becoming the Dominican James Joyce. Lola's awareness of the difficulty Oscar has in becoming an artist like Joyce overlaps with Díaz's. The novel shows that Oscar would find it difficult to sustain Joyce's values, such as the rebellion associated with the creation of language. Oscar, like many other American nerds, loses himself in the Marvel Universe and the novels of Tom Swift and H. P. Lovecraft. Unlike his Dominican American peers, Oscar spends most of his time reading and writing. He runs toward the cultural group of nerds comprised of a number of American teenagers, or fanboys, obsessed with science fiction, comic books, TV series, and role-playing games, or what Yunior simply calls "Genres." From his childhood on, Oscar has unwittingly trained to become a "young nerd—the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched Ultraman" (21). In high school, "his commitment to the Genres becomes absolute" (21). Oscar's purpose in being such a "reader/fanboy" (22) is simple. He wants to escape both his ethnic group and white American tormentors in pursuit of a sense of freedom. Stigmatized as an outsider, he confronts physical and emotional attacks from Dominican Americans as well as white American kids who "looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 51).

Scholars often propose that Oscar's "nerd" behavior enables him to be a rebellious outsider who rejects oppressive culture by stepping outside

it. For example, Finn draws on Mary Bucholtz's study, which argues that a group of white male American teenagers self-fashion themselves as "nerds" by means of employing a "superstandard English," marked as being "too white" because "the notion of a linguistic standard in the American context is bound up with whiteness" (Bucholtz 87–88). Finn proposes that Oscar radically differs from those white male nerds in that he employs "marginal" texts that help him transgress the established cultural boundaries (Finn 5). Similarly, Hanna regards the Genres as "rejected" texts and suggests that Oscar's love of fantasies, comic books, and role-playing games opposes mainstream culture and makes him a rebellious outsider (513). While emphasizing the significant functions of the Genres, such scholars overlook the troubles Oscar faces in becoming a creative writer who gains a sense of freedom by inventing his own language.

Oscar Wao, in fact, presents Oscar as constructing a uniform identity within American nerd culture in "the Nerd Age" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 22), in which socially awkward teenagers escape into the fantasy genre as a diversion from reality. Oscar, conforming to this trend, lacks the rebelliousness embodied in Dominican nerds such as Abelard and Galíndez. He takes on the collective tastes of the typical American nerds "who, as the eighties marched on, developed a growing obsession with the End of the World" (23–24). However, his escape from one domain immediately creates another imprisonment. By consuming the Genres and establishing his identity in an American youth group that seems "both ideologically gendered (male) and racialized (white)" during the 1980s (Bucholtz 85), Oscar imitates the group's collective tastes and manners, but he cannot help remaining "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 122), to borrow Homi K. Bhabha's description of a colonial subject who has undergone a partial change in the context of colonialism. Bhabha argues that colonizers, in an effort to reform the colonized, demand that the colonized take on their tastes and manners but only "partially" because they do not want the colonized to enter the circle of privilege they alone occupy (122). The consequence of such mimicry is that the colonial subject is differentiated as a recognized Other who is almost the same, but not quite (Bhabha 123). Despite

Oscar's imitation of American nerds, he is segregated from his peers and creative writers at Rutgers, whom Yunior calls "little white artist freak[s]" (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 176). Since Oscar is fat and dark skinned, he is incapable of assimilating to the group of nerds comprised of white males. Only a partial member of nerd culture, Oscar experiences a gap between his desire and reality, which drives him into depression and eventually to an attempted suicide. Without thinking about the source of his depression, Oscar keeps escaping to media and fantasy genre. He imitates the words of fictional superheroes and non-human characters in the Genres, speaks as if he were "a *Star Trek* computer" (179), and employs Elvish, the foreign language used in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. At Rutgers, he posts a sign on his dormitory room door that greets his peers with the Elvish word for friend ("mellon") (178). Oscar's consumption of the texts, in turn, causes him to blur fiction and reality. To "the deep structures in [Oscar's] nerd brain," Yunior remarks, the terror of Trujillo seems no more than a "very very attractive" fiction (255).

Díaz complicates Oscar's growth as a creative writer by having him unwittingly imitate the language of American superheroes even in the face of his death. Oscar's unconscious imitation of superheroes culminates in the scene in the cane field at the end of the novel in which many of the elements present during the attack on Beli recur. In the midst of Joaquín Balaguer's third government, Oscar travels to Santo Domingo and falls for Ybón, a Dominican prostitute and the girlfriend of a member of the Secret Police called Capitán. Capitán and another policeman kidnap Oscar and beat him in the cane field as punishment for having taken Ybón as a lover. After the beating and his subsequent return to New Jersey, Oscar goes back to Santo Domingo to court Ybón and succeeds in spending twenty-seven days with her until Capitán takes him to the cane field to murder him. Oscar confronts Capitán and his friend and challenges the men's violence by trying to "stand bravely" and delivering a formal address (331). Imagining himself as Uatu the Watcher, a Fantastic Four character, and sending a telegraphic message to all the women he has ever loved, Oscar strives to convey his message to the Dominican policemen. He makes a long speech, his

“words coming out like they belonged to someone else” (331), in which he warns his attackers that if they kill him, he will return to their children as a “hero” and an “avenger” to retaliate (332). In this way, Oscar devolves into the language of traditional American superheroes that is operated by a set of clichés and stereotypical images and inhibits a proliferation of meanings.⁶

Throughout *Oscar Wao*, Díaz represents two types of nerds. The novel distinguishes between nerds who become cultural rebels and the typical American nerds who escape to a fandom culture whose members show an “outsized love of genre” (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 22). While the novel describes Abelard and Galíndez as nerds and nonconformists who write books that expose the tyrannical forces behind the Trujillo regime, it presents Oscar as becoming an American nerd—albeit in a complex way—who immerses himself in escapist consumerism that represses the reality of his suffering. Accordingly, Oscar imitates iconic superheroes and plagiarizes their words. Díaz’s attraction to the countercultural nerd explains why he turns to Joyce and Stephen. As Díaz acknowledges, Joyce rejects British imperialism by inventing his own language; likewise, in *A Portrait* Stephen serves as an aesthetic heretic who challenges dominant language and taste. Ultimately, Lola’s wish for Oscar to become the Dominican James Joyce must be considered not a passing fantasy but a reflection of Díaz’s aspiration to be a creative writer whose act of writing engenders aesthetic innovation and political rebellion.

Notes

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). Machado Sáez contends that Díaz makes *Oscar Wao* a medium that embodies the diversity of the Dominican American diaspora (522–23).

2 For example, Goldman argues that, like Joyce, “Díaz builds his stories by weaving together the voices of different, interrelated characters.” Bakota asserts that Díaz sets his works within “transnational frameworks, frameworks that shatter the self-inflicted, deprecating Latino stereotype so prevalent in American cul-

ture” and compares Díaz to Joyce. *Oscar Wao*, he writes, “takes Joyce as a sort of model to free himself from the constraints of the Eurocentric canon.” Both pieces are reviews posted on scholarly websites. I have not yet found comparisons of Díaz and Joyce in academic journals or books.

- 3 All subsequent references to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will be indicated with the abbreviation *A Portrait*.
- 4 This kind of reaction to the precursor recalls Bloom’s “counter-sublime” or “daemonization,” which he identifies as the fourth stage in the process of developing originality and shaking off 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 their precursor’s influences in order to develop their own 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.”
- 5 This sentence comes from “The Wandering Rocks” of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (280).
- 6 For a discussion of negative impacts of the Genres, for example, see Nugent’s *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (2008). Nugent argues that the systems encoded in 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). He argues that such a text tends to limit its user’s ability to imagine and interpret.

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