

The Novel *Mezclada*:

Subverting Colonialism's Legacy in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)

Emily Shifflette

Professor Urmila Seshagiri

English 498

7 December 2010

“...the world can no longer be shaped into a system. Too many Others and Elsewheres disturb the placid surface” (229) – Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

Introduction

Junot Díaz’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), confronts the problematic issue of defining the various aspects of Dominican identity, particularly when a tumultuous colonial past has placed the nation in the crossroads of countless different cultures. From the novel’s epigraphs, Díaz sets the stage for exploring the contradictory elements of Dominicanity. Díaz’s first epigraph, from a *Fantastic Four* comic book, questions “Of what import are brief nameless lives...to **Galactus**??,” embodying the fusion of genres that characterizes the work. The nontraditional reference, which conflates colonizers with the comic book villain Galactus, first suggests Díaz’s attempt to illustrate the importance of “brief, nameless lives” by bringing a seemingly insignificant Dominican-American family to the forefront of the narrative. The novel’s second epigraph includes lines from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Schooner ‘Flight.’” “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.” In an interview with *Newsweek*, Díaz explains that he chose the passage since “the concept of a ‘nation’ is definitely problematized in a place like the Caribbean. This myth that nations exist, they have to work overtime in the Caribbean, where you have so many elements, so many mixtures, so much hybridity. But I think more importantly, a nation that erases individuals is no nation” (3). Both epigraphs echo the overarching concern undergirding the novel: colonial powers have left their enduring mark in the Caribbean, Othering its subjects until they transform into “nobodies,” while simultaneously imposing their own culture on the indigenous people and slaves.

In order to demonstrate how colonialism has transformed a nation into nobodies, the novel opens with a description of how “fukú,” a curse attributed to the arrival of European colonizers in the New World, perpetually plagues a Dominican family in New Jersey. Though centuries have passed since the “Admiral” Christopher Columbus first “discovered” the New World, Díaz depicts how the imperial need for order has resulted in lingering cultural and racial categories, constricting the eponymous character, Oscar de León, and his family. Although the events of the novel do not span to the colonial era, Díaz utilizes allegory, linking the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina to colonialism in order to depict the damaging persistence of colonial categories. Confronting these categories, Díaz provides a revisionist history of the biblical “fall” of humankind. Díaz rejects the application of the trope to colonial subjects as means by which to depict their innocence and, by extension, their lack of progress. By conflating the Europeans’ arrival with the “fall” instead of the arrival of history, Díaz combats the notion of the indigenous people as ahistorical, exposing the need to (re)discover the erased and unwritten histories of the novel's characters. The numerous “páginas en blanco,” or blank pages, that appear throughout the novel reveal the Europeans’ flawed, linear vision of history; Díaz critiques the erasing of history through the allegorical indigenous character, Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather. The “páginas en blanco” of Abelard’s identity mirror Frantz Fanon’s notion of “emptying the native,” further revealing how colonialism has relegated its subjects to a subhuman category. In particular, the dehumanization of African slaves results in persisting racial dichotomies; Díaz uses Oscar’s mother, Belicia Cabral, as an allegorical slave figure in part to reveal the Dominicans’ inability to completely accept blackness.

As a response to this discourse of homogeneity, Díaz problematizes sameness, subverting the lingering effects of colonial categories. Díaz demonstrates how Oscar’s inability to mold into

Dominican visions of masculinity, evocative of the Spanish conqueror, culminates in his violent death. However, in order to atone for his complicity in Oscar's death, the narrator Yunió transforms the "ghetto nerd" Oscar into "wondrous." Yunió reverses his attempt to shove Oscar into a homogenous category by drawing on numerous literary traditions, such as the European bildungsroman, the magic realism of Latin America, and comic book or superhero fiction to adequately describe Oscar's life; the fusion of styles constructs a hybrid novel that reflects the Creolization of Caribbean culture. By dialoguing with the colonial past, particularly through the use of allegory, Díaz exposes the paralytic effects of colonialism's legacy: Abelard finds himself unable to return to his pre-lapsarian state, just as Beli, unable to move forward, trades tyranny in the Dominican Republic for slave-like working conditions in the United States. Unable to escape fukú's effects, Díaz uses the novel as a "zafa," or fukú's counterspell, and reappropriates the various tropes of colonial discourse in order to show that "you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in" (*Oscar Wao* 209). Díaz suggests the ultimate subversion of colonial dichotomies requires the interweaving of the Dominican's colonial, Afro-Caribbean, and indigenous cultures. By juxtaposing a *mezcla* of cultures, including the Dominican's Spanish history, the novel both indicts the damage of colonialism and deconstructs homogenous systems of classification.

Historical fukú: the Dominican's colonial past

The events of the novel primarily occur during and after the reign of Trujillo (1930-1961); yet, as Díaz hints in the opening chapter by conflating fukú with Christopher Columbus, the arrival of Spanish conquistadores still actively haunts the Dominican Republic and paved the way for centuries of tyranny. Upon arrival, the Spanish named the island as if it were Spanish progeny, deeming it "La Española," or little Spain; in contrast, the indigenous Taínos referred to

the Dominican as the inception of life, naming it Quisqueya, or “The Mother of All Lands” (Cambiero 8). The Taínos frequently fended off attacks from their aggressive neighbors, the Caribs, but they otherwise were pacifists. In *Quisqueya la Bella* Alan Cambeira provides a brief portrait of Taíno culture:

Taíno society was basically communal in nature and egalitarian in nature. There was no notion of private or individually owned property, for instance. Every available resource was the property of the whole community. The primary economic activity was agriculture, a necessary activity in which all members of the community both participated and benefited. The society itself had tremendous internal flexibility and mobility. (36)

Their egalitarian and non-aggressive tendencies would later violently collide with Spanish models of society.

The Spanish, led by Christopher Columbus, first landed in “Española” in 1492, and Columbus established an outpost, driven by the prospect of mining gold (Moya Pons 29). The colonizers soon began to exploit the Taínos, particularly by creating the repartimiento (the distributing) system, which partitioned the indigenous people to Spanish owners. The Spanish used them for gold mining, and Frank Moya Pons describes their desolate fate:

Once the Indians entered the mines, hunger and disease literally wiped them out. Those who did manage to survive for 8 to 12 months in the mines became so desperate that many eventually committed suicide in collective ceremonies. Pregnant women systematically aborted or killed their own children to prevent them from becoming slaves. The volume of deaths was such that a 1508 census revealed that there were only 60,000 Indians left out of an original population of around 400,000. (34)

The Spanish crown later sanctioned the systematic enslavement of the indigenous under *encomienda*, which condoned the distribution of the indigenous, provided that their owner instilled them with Catholicism (33). However, disease and enslavement eventually wiped out the entire indigenous population. Taíno lineage has only survived through *mestizaje*, particularly as a result of the Spanish men taking Taíno women as their wife or mistress (Cambeira 40).

When the indigenous numbers drastically dwindled, the Spanish turned to other sources of labor, importing slaves from Africa. The Spanish concurrently decimated the island's gold supply, which incited a shift to sugar cane cultivation. The sugar cane industry and slave labor quickly became inextricably intertwined, and by 1568, an estimated 20,000 slaves toiled on sugar plantations and cattle farms, easily outnumbering their European owners (Moya Pons 37). In *The Imagined Island*, Pedro L. San Miguel describes detailed information about slave life as “lacking” (49), and as a result, “we must assume that master-slave relations in the predominantly plantation economy of the sixteenth century different little from what would later be observed in other regions of the Americas. The plantation...was characterized by a rigid social structure; the proper place of masters and workers were clearly delimited” (49). As with the Taíno women, slave owners frequently took advantage of their superior position by forcing their female slaves into sexual relationships, further creating a society defined by *mestizaje* (San Miguel 36). Sugar cane production eventually faltered, reducing the dependence on slaves; however, racial hierarchies, created by the master-slave hierarchy, still linger.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Dominican Republic experienced the rule of numerous colonial powers. In 1795, Spain ceded their holdings to France; Haiti soon invaded and occupied the entire island. By 1808 Spain accomplished their Reconquista, the Spanish once again ruling over their eastern colony (Cambeira 142). Dominicans extricated

themselves from Spanish rule in 1844, becoming an independent nation, but their sovereignty did not endure (152). Spain resumed control over the Dominican in 1861, after a group of wealthy landowners petitioned for Spain to annex the country (154). In 1865, the conclusion of the War of Restoration allowed the Dominicans to retain autonomy, but by 1907, the United States gained economic control, taking the Dominican under protectorate status. Thus, in addition to Taíno and African influences, Spain, France, and the United States all played roles in the shaping of Dominican culture.

Before finally withdrawing their physical presence, the United States exerted their influence on the Dominican economy, military, and politics, and paved the way for three decades (1930-1961) of Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina's dictatorship. Though a Dominican, Trujillo's rule varied little from the previous colonial powers, particularly since he had backing from the United States and Spain (Peguero 4). Similar to his colonial predecessors, Trujillo garnered control of the nation's economy, controlling the majority of Dominican industries (Cambeira 180). Trujillo violently eliminated his opposition and advocated for the "whitening" of the Dominican Republic; Trujillo wanted to turn to an era that, in the words of a supporter, conserved "the Spanish character of our nationality" (qtd. San Miguel 57). In addition to evoking the rhetoric of colonial times, San Miguel argues that Trujillo's racist discourse mirrored the current European view:

In the Dominican Republic, as in other countries of the Americas, certain influences were becoming palpable; the influence of fascism and of doctrines in Europe that were promulgating the 'cleansing' of one's nation of all those elements which were considered alien to the national 'essence' and which were thought to somehow weaken that nation. (58)

As a result of the attempt to establish a nation evocative of the colonial period, Trujillo's regime slaughtered over 20,000 people of African descent in the 1937 Haitian Massacre. Even after Trujillo's assassination in 1961, "la fobia antihaitiana" that Trujillo ingrained in the Dominican public has lingered, resulting in tense race relationships (Cambeira 134). By tying both the "Admiral" and Trujillo to the curse of fukú, Díaz connects Trujillo to colonialism. Through the juxtaposition of Trujillo and fukú, Díaz argues that colonial thought still mars Dominican society, even after the collapse of empires.

Páginas en blanco

Although the Dominican obviously possesses a multilayered and tumultuous history, at the beginning of the novel, Yunior draws attention to the Dominican's relegation to footnotes in the pages of history. In a footnote, Yunior explains Trujillo's identity to "those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (*Oscar Wao* 2), sardonically highlighting the Dominican's lack of importance in the eyes of its former occupiers. In an introduction to an English-language volume of Dominican history from 1998, the historian Frank Moya Pons similarly suggests the lack of interest in Dominican history, stating that he hopes his monograph will "fill this academic gap" (9). Particularly through the stories about Abelard and Belicia Cabral, Díaz suggests these absences in history have roots in the Dominican's colonial past, as both stories have irrecoverable "páginas en blanco." At the opening of Abelard's story, Yunior explains how "When the family talks about it all—which is like never—they always start in the same place—with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (*Oscar Wao* 211). By placing Abelard at the "beginning" (211), Díaz implies his autochthony and thus suggests Abelard functions as a symbol of the native population. Díaz further conflates Abelard with the indigenous population through their family home, Casa Hatüey, named after a Taíno chief. As a

result, the oppression Abelard suffers at the hands of Trujillo's regime, his "fall," serves as an allegory for the "fall" of the Taínos to Spanish conquerors.

In his essay "On National Culture," Frantz Fanon argues: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (200). Díaz's portrayal of Dr. Abelard Cabral evokes Fanon's notion of "emptying the native," as Díaz shows how Trujillo's regime renders Abelard without history or identity. Abelard does not resist his object status in Trujillo's Dominican until Trujillo insists on meeting Abelard's daughter; Trujillo "believed all the toto in the DR was, literally, his...if you were of a certain and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be manado his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!*" (217), a statement which reflects the idea that the Spanish conquerors had free access to native bodies. Abelard combats the objectification of his daughter, refusing to give his daughter to Trujillo; however, Trujillo imprisons Abelard in an effort to return Abelard to his object status. Abelard's imprisonment "Turned him into a vegetable. The proud flame of his intellect extinguished. For the rest of his short life he existed in an imbecilic stupor" (251). Abelard's "imbecilic stupor" closely mirrors Fanon's idea that colonialism starts with "emptying the native brain of all form and content" (200), as Abelard loses all notions of his prior identity. Yunió describes the extent of Abelard's erasure and explains that Trujillo does not leave "one single example of his handwriting" (246), reflecting how colonialism's homogeneity extends to native languages. When Yunió attempts to recreate Abelard's story, he notes the difficulty in doing so: "What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in narrative silences here. Trujillo and company didn't leave a paper trail—there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the

generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction” (243). The “narrative silences” of Abelard’s story reflect historical blank pages, which parallel Fanon’s claim of how colonialism “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (200), creating a discourse of sameness that dehumanizes the native population.

Abelard’s story also functions as a dialogue with Western notions of history. When Yuniors states that “There are other beginnings, certainly, better ones, to be sure--if you ask me, I would have started when the Spaniards ‘discovered’ the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916” (211), he critiques hegemonic nations and their revision of history. The suggestion that the story could begin with the arrival of Spain or the United States reflects the notion that history only truly begins when the colonial power brings their conquest into “current” history. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant discusses how Western temporal categories, which separate history from prehistory, result in Othering. Glissant argues that such distinctions create a hierarchy that implies some societies have attained higher levels of “civilization” in comparison with their “pre-historical” neighbors.

However, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz combats the notion that “The Great Encounter” propelled the Dominican into history by conflating Columbus’s arrival with the Biblical fall of mankind (211). Díaz’s use of “the fall” engages numerous colonial discourses. The phrase “the fall” suggests that Dominicans possess a history that precedes the arrival of the Spanish, and detailing the period prior to Abelard’s fall allows Díaz to write the blank pages of history. Rewriting history enables Díaz to critique dominant historiographies, and Díaz suggests that the Spanish conquest has *disrupted* an Edenic society instead of *creating* one. San Miguel describes an eighteenth-century revisionist vision of history by Sánchez-Velverde:

The sixteenth century was truly a golden age, to which he traces the foundations of the community he would like to portray—a community in which peninsular Spanish ethnic and cultural elements are predominant. Consequently, other ethnocultural elements—particularly Afro-Dominican elements—are played down, marginalized, or totally ignored. In Sánchez-Valverde’s reconstruction of colonial history, the sixteenth century constitutes a founding, a veritable Eden ‘a mythical age, happy if not perfect, at the beginning of the universe,’ to quote Jacques Le Goff.” (10)

In contrast, Yuniór describes Abelard’s family home as “a rambling oft-expanded villa eclectic whose original stone ore had been transformed into Abelard’s study, a house bounded by groves of almonds and dwarf mangos” (212), evoking a harmonious existence. Though Díaz fuses the Cabrales and paradise, he also deconstructs the myth of the idealized savage, who exists solely in state of nature. The image of Casa Hatüey, an obvious artifice of civilization, contradicts the notion of a utopian natural state; the “groves of almonds and dwarf mangos” alongside Abelard’s study depict a clear intersection of culture and nature. However, despite Yuniór’s attempt to fill the “páginas en blanco” of Abelard’s pre-lapsarian life, Díaz suggests the difficulty in completing all the missing pages, as the family “like never” talks of Abelard (211). The impossibility of completing these blank pages reflects the irreversible effects of narrow colonial categories.

Notions of blackness

Yuniór extends his quest to fill the “páginas en blanco” in the pages of Oscar’s family’s history to Abelard’s daughter Belicia. Díaz describes how Beli “was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack” (248). In Díaz’s juxtaposition, he ties Beli’s blackness to numerous geographical regions—the Congo,

Latin America, India, and Mexico. Thus, Beli's connections to regions across the globe suggest she functions as an allegorical slave figure. Yuniór continues the allegory, describing Beli's early years; he details how Beli "was sold to complete strangers in another part of Azua. That's right—she was sold. Became a criada, a restavek" (253); Yuniór describes criadas [servants] as "the most demolished, overworked, human beings I'd known at that time" (253), connecting Beli with the work of slaves. Yuniór's references to Beli's owners as her "mother" and "father" evoke both colonial rhetoric and plantation mythology, which claim natives and slaves as their children. However, Díaz dispels the trope by revealing the violence Beli experiences at the hands of her owners; Beli has a scar on her back after her "parents" burn her, a mark that reflects the branding of slaves. Later, the violence inflicted on Beli in the cane fields also ties Beli to slavery, as Spanish colonizers first transported slaves to the Dominican Republic in order to harvest sugar cane. In a moment in which Yuniór directly refers to Beli's link to slavery, he details: "They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog... Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it's not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly" (147). As with Abelard, Díaz suggests slavery renders Beli at "the end of language;" Díaz further reveals how colonialism causes more than physical violence, also resulting in the totalizing erasure of identity and history. The telling of how Beli has reached "the end of language," however, serves as an attempt to recreate the lost history of slaves, particularly revealing the acts of physical violence against them. Despite moving to the United States, the novel suggests Beli never overcomes her slave-like status; Díaz describes her working environment as "the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías" (164). Díaz employs Beli's life of oppression in the United States as a means by which to deconstruct the myth of the

United States as welcoming and pluralistic: “You come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized ” (896). Díaz’s portrayal of Beli’s life in the United States serves as an indictment for the United States’ own role in both expansionist colonial oppression and racially motivated internal colonialism.

By fusing Beli with slavery, Díaz not only illuminates the violence downplayed in dominant versions of history, but also suggests that racial dichotomies created by the colonial plantation system still linger. In particular, the novel’s treatment of race reveals how the Dominican’s association of blackness with the Other persists. David Howard summarizes the treatment of blackness in the Dominican:

Negritud is associated in popular Dominican opinion with the Haitian population.

Dominicanidad, on the other hand, represents a celebration of whiteness, Hispanic heritage and Catholicism...Dominicans describe race with a plethora of color-coded terms, ranging from coffee, chocolate, cinnamon, and wheat, to the adoption of indio/a, a device which avoids using mulatto/a or negro/a. (2-3)

Superficially, Dominicans avail themselves of a multiplicity of terms describing race suggests the deconstruction of rigid racial hierarchies. Yet, ultimately, Dominicans use the qualifiers in order to avoid falling into the supposedly undesirable category of black; instead of overthrowing constructions of race, the range of colors only reinforces a racial hierarchy that insists blackness occupies the lowest rung. As a result of colonialism’s systematic classification, Dominicans attempt to position themselves on the “Spanish” end of the racial spectrum, at the darkest, “indio” or mulatto. Díaz demonstrates the disdain of blackness in the Dominican through other characters’ response to Beli’s skin. Díaz explains how after Beli is essentially orphaned, “the

scuttlebutt around the family has it that as she was so dark no one on Abelard's side of the family would take her" (252); after Beli's grandmother, La Inca, rescues her from her "family," La Inca hears, "She can't be your family, she's a prieta [very dark skinned]" (257). Díaz also depicts how Beli insists "She was not morena [dark skinned] (even the car dealer knew better, called her india)" (115), demonstrating Dominicans' attempts to avoid the category of black. Through the rejection of Beli's skin, Díaz suggests that even after the conclusion of slavery, plantation hierarchies still linger.

Díaz's "GhettoNerd"

In contrast with Abelard and Belicia, the extremely overweight Oscar literally lacks the ability to fit within colonial systems of categorization. Yuniór explains that, as a Dominican, "dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (24). Instead, Oscar "wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21), and aspires to write stories along the lines of Tolkien; near the conclusion of his life, he takes on the project of recording the "páginas en blanco" of his family's history, a task Yuniór later completes. However, the defining characteristics of Oscar's identity do not fall within accepted notions of Dominican masculinity; Yuniór explains: "It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies...Oscar had like a zero combat rating, even Olga and her toothpick arms could have stomped him silly. Aggression and intimidation out of the question" (15). Valentina Perguera provides a brief portrait of masculinity in the Dominican Republic that starkly contrasts Oscar's passivity and obsession with science fiction: "when a young man became an adult, the father customarily gave him a gun, which symbolized that the period of adolescence had ended. They also took sons to

prostitutes for sexual initiation” (75). Perguera suggests forceful sexual conquests define the ideal male, an image of masculinity mirroring both the Spanish colonizer and how Trujillo had believed “all the toto in the DR was, literally, his” (*Oscar Wao* 217). In contrast, Yunior describes the taunting Oscar receives from his peers:

I like to think it wasn't *too* bad. The boys didn't slap him too hard. But I guess it was pretty heartless any way you slice it. You ever eat toto? Melvin would ask, and Oscar would shake his head, answer decently, no matter how many times Mel asked. Probably the only thing you ain't eaten, right? Harold would say, Tú no eres nada de Dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am. (181)

Harold's insult, “Tú no eres nada de Dominicano,” ties Dominican identity to sexual exploits. Even Yunior, who demonstrates a familiarity with science fiction, admits he “was never really his friend” (181). Oscar desires love, yet never heeds the advice of his uncle: “Listen palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y mételo! That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y mételo!”(24), an act which would imitate the violence of conquest.

Yet, the conclusion of the novel suggests Oscar has even thwarted the label of “nerd.” After receiving Oscar's final letter, Yunior reveals that Oscar has overcome his isolated state, losing his virginity to the prostitute Ybón in the Dominican Republic. Although their relationship mirrors a coming of age that includes visiting a prostitute (Perquera 75), Díaz alters the balance of power and implies love, not conquest, defines their relationship. Instead, Yunior demonstrates how Oscar also attempts to rescue Ybón from her subjugation. Ybón's relationship with the tyrannical capitán and her reference to prostitution as “making the patria [fatherland] strong” suggest colonialism has also relegated Ybón's body to part of the landscape (284); the capitán's violent sexual conquest once again reflects Trujillo and the Spanish conquerors before him.

Yunior recounts how even through their sex, Oscar has tried to transform her into an individual.

In his letter to Yunior, Oscar writes:

“Ybón had little hairs coming up to almost her bellybutton and that she crossed her eyes when he entered her but what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck.” (334)

Oscar’s words, which focus on the “little intimacies,” imply he values her individuality; unlike the Spanish conquerors and their militaristic legacy, Oscar does not see her as a faceless body.

Tragically, Oscar’s subversion of homogeneity results in his violent death. Particularly, when Oscar attempts to rescue Ybón from the capitán and, by extension, her fate as an object, Oscar disrupts the rigidly demarcated hierarchy first set in place by Spain’s arrival. As with Belicia, the officers take Oscar to the cane fields, beating him in an effort to force him back inside the colonial hierarchy. Before his death, Oscar attempts to defy his object status, asserting his individualism through his last words:

He told them what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world...He told him that it was only because of her love that he’d been able to do the thing he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, and told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing, and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn’t be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he’d be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be. (321)

In Oscar's final words, he argues how his imminent death perpetuates the cycle of violence incited by colonialism, as he argues if the guards murder him "their children would probably feel nothing either." When he claims: "he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you dream...you can be," Oscar rejects the predetermined, narrow categories of colonial discourse and steps outside his subjecthood. Unwilling to allow Oscar's assertion of selfhood, the guards ultimately burn Oscar. The use of fire, which physically disfigures him, reflects an effort to "empty" Oscar of his distinct identity, an idea Díaz reiterates when Oscar appears to Yuniór in his dreams "wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face...Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank" (325). The narration of Oscar's death abruptly ends with the word "Oscar—" (321), and Díaz leaves the remainder of the page blank, suggesting Oscar's death serves as an attempt to wipe away the individual history of another victim of the Dominican's colonial past. Oscar's death paints a bleak portrait of stepping outside the systematic categorization colonialism's legacy has imprinted on Dominican society.

The novel as "zafa"

Oscar's story borrows from the narrative arc of the realist bildungsroman, as the novel charts his development from childhood to adulthood. Maria Karafilis defines the bildungsroman as:

a specific type of novel written in a specific nation at a specific point in time (Germany in the late 18th century). It is a novel that relates the development of a (male) protagonist who matures through a process of acculturation and ultimately attains harmony with his surrounding society. (63)

The novel only fits within the bildungsroman format in the sense that it charts Oscar, a male protagonist's, progression; however, Díaz makes deliberate alterations to the genre, arguably

using elements of the novel to create an anti-bildungsroman, replacing acculturation with Oscar's death. Karafilis argues that postcolonial writers incorporate pieces of the genre into their works in order to "comment on dominant Euro-American society by revising or even rejecting some of its values and certain aspects of its literary traditions" (64); Díaz similarly revises the European genre in order to "write back." By altering the bildungsroman, Díaz demonstrates the impossibility of Oscar ever achieving "harmony with his surrounding society," as society delivers Oscar his death sentence when he asserts his individualism; Díaz argues that acculturation should not serve as the narrative ideal, as conforming would deny Oscar his distinct identity.

However, even though Oscar's violent death thwarts his development, Díaz once again alters the realist bildungsroman, applying elements of the genre to Yúniór. Although the narrator, Yúniór's physical presence rarely marks the narrative. After Oscar's death, the image of Oscar "wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face" frequently haunts Yúniór. Yúniór's dream reflects how he also had played a role in Oscar's subjugation, frequently taunting him and even using him in order to impress Oscar's sister, Lola, whom he dates intermittently throughout the novel. In fact, Yúniór's sexual exploits frequently unite him with the colonizers and Trujillo; in spite of Yúniór and Lola's numerous attempts to maintain a relationship, Yúniór permanently loses Lola, explaining "All my fault, of course. Couldn't keep my rabo in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world" (*Oscar Wao* 311). Thus, even when Yúniór achieves the marriage plot central to the bildungsroman's goal of societal assimilation, his conformity to the hypermasculine ideal denies him the harmonious conclusion promised by the bildungsroman. Yúniór reveals that Lola "had been pregnant once, a real moment of excitement, but she aborted it because I was cheating on her with some girl" (269), her abortion symbolizing

the impossibility of a fruitful union. However, Yuniór seemingly recognizes that “Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (325), and, to atone for his complicity, Yuniór continues where Oscar had ceased his work in the writing of the family’s blank pages. By distinguishing Oscar as “incredible,” Yuniór attempts to thwart the homogenization of colonialism, as he forefronts Oscar against a crowd of sameness. Even though Oscar’s death implies the impossibility of reconciling the present-day Dominican Republic with its colonial past, Yuniór’s newfound awareness concludes the novel on a more hopeful note. When Yuniór recognizes his culpability, Díaz implies that drawing attention to colonialism’s damaging legacy, particularly through writing, serves as a “zafa,” or counterspell, to colonialism’s “fukú.”

In his narrative of atonement, Yuniór immediately alters the previous hierarchy of power by creating a narrative that defies categorization. Yuniór interweaves Spanish and pop-culture references into his narrative, bringing what much of the Western world deems “foreign” and obscure into the limelight. From the beginning of the novel, Díaz unapologetically fuses English with Spanish and provides his monolingual readers with no glossary. In an interview after the publication of his collection of short stories, *Drown*, Díaz defends his use of Spanish:

Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world, not inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English...by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English. (904)

Ironically, Díaz must defend his use of a colonial language to another Western hegemony, and Díaz's defense of Spanish suggests he has reclaimed the language for the Others' use. As no predominant group comprises the Dominican Republic, the nation lacks the ability to return to a native language; adopting the Taíno language would negate the African presence, nor does one single African group occupy the Dominican. The Spanish slang in Yuniór's narrative frequently does not represent the "pure" Castilian of the Spanish Royal Academy, the institute in Spain responsible for "regulating" the Spanish language. Instead, Yuniór's narrative borders on an oral tale, his conversational tone and colloquial language enabling him to evoke a semblance of folklore; the seamless fusion of English and Spanish verges on a new language that subverts the "purity" of both hegemonic languages. From the novel's opening chapter, Yuniór relies on both languages; in one lyrical example of his code-switching, Yuniór explains:

...every single Dominican, from the richest jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano from to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew: that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú so dreadful it would make the one that attached itself to the Admiral jojote in comparison. (*Oscar Wao* 3)

Amongst the interspersed Spanish words, "jabao" (a derogatory term for a light-skinned mulatto) and "güey" (fool) have solely colloquial usage, and Yuniór likely alters "jojote" from the Spanish word "jojoto" (unripe); thus, Yuniór creates his own language, even modifying the Spanish to fit his narrative requirements. Having little viable alternative, Díaz blends two dominant languages; yet, does so in a way that allows him to claim Spanish for his own use.

In his narrative, Yuniór chooses to undermine the damage of history not by ignoring its existence, but by diminishing its authority. Through his use of language, Yuniór turns some of the major players in Dominican history into the "nameless," reversing the "empty native" trope

by applying it to those who attempted to destroy the identity of entire cultures. Yuniór refuses to mention Christopher Columbus by name, insisting on referring to him solely as the “Admiral” (1). Yuniór explains: “the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours” (1). The connection between fukú and Columbus’s name demonstrates the power inherent in naming; calling him by name gives him authority, thus perpetuating the cycle of fukú. Similarly, Yuniór reduces the Dominican dictator Trujillo to a footnote. He only tells the audience that “Trujillo, one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality” in text removed from the main narrative (2), transforming him into an afterthought. Yuniór discusses Trujillo, but largely in relation to those he oppresses, reversing the former power hierarchy.

The footnotes similarly engage with the narrow view of history European colonizers applied to the “New World.” Yuniór incorporates footnotes into his narrative, evoking an academic text and even citing historical events. However, Yuniór draws attention to how he has revised history for the purpose of his narrative; he explains to his readers that

In my first draft, Samana was actually Jarbacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraph of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (132)

His confession reflects the subjective nature of history portrayed in Abelard’s story, as Yuniór demonstrates the narrative quality of history; Yuniór prefers the story to include the perrito

despite its historical inaccuracy, suggesting how easily historians can alter history for the sake of a better “image.” Thus, dominant forces write history in a manner that cements their superiority; in the case of conquest, writing historiographies that include the “primitive” Other. By demonstrating the ease in which Yuniór alters historical information, Díaz suggests that “History ultimately emerges as a fantasy peculiar to the Western imagination in its pursuit of a discourse that legitimizes its power and condemns other cultures to the periphery” (Dash xxix).

In an effort to combat the linear notion of history, Yuniór toys with the traditional format of the novel. Yuniór pieces narrative fragments together, not telling any particular story in chronological order. The novel begins and ends with Oscar’s story, but the readers know of his tragic death before Yuniór details Oscar’s childhood; in spite of the tale “beginning” with Abelard, Yuniór only recounts his story after first providing fragments of Oscar and Belicia’s lives, suggesting the overlap of history. Díaz’s defiance of linear progression reflects Glissant’s claim: “Western realism is not a ‘flat’ or shallow technique but becomes so when it is uncritically used by our writers. The misery of our lands is present, obvious. It contains a historical dimension (of not obvious history) that realism alone cannot account for” (Glissant 146). In contrast, however, the fragmentation and blank pages of the novel more accurately depict “the misery of our lands,” illustrating the fragmentation and missing pieces of Dominican identity; even at the conclusion of the novel, Yuniór admits that he lacks the ability to completely fill all “the páginas en blanco,” never even receiving Oscar’s final package. Thus, “Western realism” does not allow Díaz to adequately portray the realism of the Dominican Republic, as a linear structure would suggest a definite ending to legacy of “fukú.”

Conclusion

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao paints a somber portrait of the possibility of escaping fukú's vicious cycle, the conclusion of the novel stating that "Nothing ever ends" (*Oscar Wao* 331). The novel's nonlinear structure reveals the enduring nature of colonialism's violation, as the characters' fates overlap; the allegorical status of Belicia and Abelard imply that the Dominican Republic has only traded one dominating force for another. Abelard's imprisonment and subsequent erasure under Trujillo's regime mirror the annihilation of the Taíno people and culture shortly after arrival of the Spanish colonizers, and the lingering blank pages of Abelard's story reflect the necessity of recovering the Dominican's lost past. Yunior manages to recover some of Belicia's "lost years," which reveal that her dark skin has resulted in a slave-like status. Similar to Belicia's vicious beatings, Oscar's death occurs in the canefields, and the fire has the same totalizing erasure as Abelard's "imbecilic stupor" (251). Díaz's reliance on allegory in order to give names to the nameless further illustrates the overwhelming damage of colonialism, as using solely Abelard and Belicia as representatives of entire cultural groups evokes the impossibility of recovering the histories of each erased individual.

However, unlike Belicia and Abelard, who primarily function as a means to provide a revision of history, Oscar has no allegorical status, particularly since he fits within no single group. Instead, Oscar represents the centrality of narrative for the ending of fukú. At the conclusion of the novel, Yunior describes his vision of the future, envisioning Lola's daughter in the final completion of the "páginas en blanco:"

One day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do...If she's her family's daughter—as I suspect she is—one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers...I'll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators

where I store her tío's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—
 refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost
 anything...And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll
 be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll
 put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream. (330-31)

The filling in of history, “the cure to what ails us...The Cosmo DNA” (333), suggests the importance of narrative to the reconciliation of the multiple histories and cultures comprising the nation. In particular, engaging with the tropes that fill the pages of history books allows Díaz to both acknowledge the permanency of colonialism's legacy and to dismantle its authority as the only true history. For Díaz, writing *back* requires the writing *in* of personal narratives; the completion of the characters' stories combats the homogenizing discourse of colonialism that disregards the “brief, nameless lives” of Ghetto Nerds. As a novel concerned with reversing the relegation of “minor” characters to the footnotes of history, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suggests the necessity of forefronting brief lives as a means by which to locate the individual within history as well as understand the history within the individual.

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