

Filling in the Blanks: Ambiguity, Genre, and Reader Participation as Anti-Dictatorial Forces in

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* recounts the story of the nerdy and romantic Dominican-American Oscar de León while situating him within a larger and more complex story consisting of his immigrant family's past, the history of the Dominican Republic under its United States-backed dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, and an ancient curse known as the fukú. The novel is narrated by a character within its pages, rather than directly by the author. Yunior, another Dominican-American and an acquaintance of Oscar's family, relates events from his own past and that of the de León family based on his own experience, research he conducts, and other efforts. Throughout the work, what he says and what he leaves unsaid draws the act of bearing witness and testifying into focus as both a powerful and dangerous force.

In this paper, I will discuss Yunior's storytelling and the phenomenon in general as both an act of zafa - a countercurse taking the form of resistance against colonialism, dictatorship, and authoritarianism - and its own problematic act of control. Within the novel, Yunior recognizes the dictatorial nature inherent to a single narrator and attempts to counter it by leaving ambiguous spaces, sampling works of genre, and allowing other characters' voices to be heard. However, this only creates another layer of illusion between the text and its real "dictator", Díaz himself. I will argue that to mitigate the inherent danger of one storyteller, the novel demands readers complete the work of anti-dictatorial resistance. By challenging readers to follow up on references and give their own meaning to the novel's many páginas en blanco, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* enlists readers' cooperation to avoid a single voice's supremacy.

The novel can be picked up and read by anyone, but when Yunior speaks to a "you", he has a specific group in mind. This group will be referred to as the "target reader", the

demographic Yunion seems most interested in getting his message out to. Yunion presumes that his target reader is from the United States. Citizens of the United States, particularly privileged whites, tend to remain blissfully ignorant of the damage wrought by their country, something Yunion refers to caustically several times. His assumption that his target reader is another ignorant non-Dominican American or perhaps an immigrant who has lost connection to their heritage and history is shown by what he expects them not to know. His first footnote begins, “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history”, sarcastically suggesting that the target reader’s education did not bother to cover the nation’s past at all (Díaz 3). His fifth footnote adds in a parenthetical, “(You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either” (19). The mention of Iraq keys into a United States frame of reference; Yunion does not provide footnotes explaining contemporary U.S. mainstream history. He assumes his reader knows it. The implication is that they are a United States citizen, ignorant of their home nation’s continued outrages in Latin America. Anyone can pick up the novel, but Yunion addresses this demographic more aggressively, perhaps because they most need to hear his message. The United States of America has a major connection to the curse that haunts the novel's pages. The European “discovery” of the Americas began it, and the nation remains a source of imperial power and dominance. As a member of that country, the target reader is part of its hegemonic domination, even if they do not participate directly. They are a faceless part of its curse and reach.

Having established this target audience, the novel’s motif of blank spaces and the figure of the man without a face relate to the interpretive responsibility of the target reader, who acts simultaneously as the novel’s perpetrator of violence and witness to history. After its narrator

and author fight dictatorship as much as they can alone, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* places the reader within its pages, demanding they do their part in making the work a true counterspell.

Fukú versus zafa: Silence versus witnessing as tools to uphold or combat dictatorship

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao justifies the necessity of its existence and begins its argument for reader support by setting up a contested binary between good and evil, curses and countercurses, and writers and dictators. Dictators are shown as overbearing writers forcing their narrative on others or silencing the opposition, while victims may silence themselves or speak out only to begin overwriting others in turn. After examining the slippery gray territory between these forces, Díaz seems to conclude that one safe and vital course of action is to listen – which is what the novel as a whole wants the target reader to do.

First, to illustrate the need for more critical reading, apparent good/evil binaries must be broken down. Two vital concepts within the novel are fukú and zafa. Fukú is a curse brought into being by the first European acts of slavery, colonialism, and domination in the New World. It haunts everyone and can be blamed for any misfortune. Zafa, on the other hand, is a spoken countercurse against the fukú, which is the speaker's only hope for protection if the curse comes their way. The two forces are intertwined throughout the story. Curse versus countercurse, oppression versus resistance – these concepts suggest a moral universe as black and white as Superman versus Lex Luthor. Jennifer Harford Vargas argues that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* “stages a conflict between the fukú and the zafa, between domination and resistance. The two underlying symbolic organization principles embody the dual signification of dictating as domination (the fukú) and dictating as recounting or writing back (the zafa)” (Vargas 10). She sets up a dichotomy placing the two meanings of “dictate” in opposition as forces struggling

against one another. This struggle does exist, but the similarities of the rivals remains an underlying reason for caution.

Political and literary dictators share the same root. At their most basic, the terms are linked by their etymology. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “dictator” derives from a Latin word that also referred to an author or writer. The *OED* cites several languages that contain words descended from this source, including the Spanish “dictador”, which referred to poets in the 13th century (“Dictator”). “Dictador” is now one of the language’s words for dictators. That shared origin complicates the fight between the two forms of dictation. As Yunion says,

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they’ve had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Deathstroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like (Díaz 97).

Yunion sets up two opposing teams as Vargas does. However, his choice to draw on both genre and contemporary references also unites them. Like indeed recognizes like; frequently these pairs are battling over who can do better in a shared role or while pursuing a shared end. The X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, as people familiar with the story of Charles Xavier and Magneto would know, approach similar goals with two radically different strategies. At times they even ally. Ali and Foreman, though facing off, were both boxers. The order of the examples is also significant. Yunion begins with a Dictator - Writer order, asking what it is “with Dictators and Writers” and listing “Caesar-Ovid” as a prototypical example. Afterward, though, the lines blur. Comic book heroes are listed in front of their villains, destabilizing the original list format. Morrison is the writer under attack by Crouch. In duos like Foreman and Ali or Sammy

and Sergio, no clear villain or hero presents himself – they are merely two members of the same field. The list sets up dictators and writers as ambiguously classed individuals doing the same “job”, trying to take out the other side so that they can reign unchallenged. In the lens of the genre references peppering the work, his description of the two as “natural antagonists” also gains another layer of meaning. Within a work of fiction, the antagonist is the force that opposes the hero – not always but often a villain. Yuniór, as the writer of the story, implicates himself in this assessment, and his connection to “dictating” in both senses will be examined further later. In general, his list makes writing a battleground where dictators and writers fight for supremacy in different ways, both shedding metaphorical or literal blood along the way.

Dictators in the novel thrive on silence, letting no voices be heard but their own. Trujillo is famed “for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself”, literally rewriting the country (Díaz 2). His crony and successor Balaguer is described as

a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say impunity?) Balaguer died in 2002. The *página* is still *blanca* (90).

Balaguer, a strongman and dictator allied with the Trujillato, kills people who write “better than himself”, which acknowledges him too as a writer – one who intentionally leaves holes. The failure to fill in the blank page afterward points to the lasting power and control the men have over their narratives. Even after their deaths, their silencing effects linger, just as the *fukú* continues to claim victims long after the official ages of dictatorship and colonialism have ended. The term “*página en blanco*” becomes a recurring motif in the novel as blank spaces arise in the histories and events the narrator tries to convey. Yuniór, trying to retell history from the

Trujillato, admits, “We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail” (243). When dictators can, they crush opposing voices and hide evidence of misdeeds.

Oscar’s ancestor Abelard was imprisoned and tortured by the Trujillato. Theories vary about the reason why, but one version claims, “he got in trouble because of a book” that would reveal the secrets of the dictator (243). Abelard, in this theory, dies because he dares challenge the national mythos of Trujillo’s greatness with an alternative version, which is unacceptable. All of Abelard’s writing is destroyed after his death. No scrap of opposing language can be left in existence, even those that might be harmless. The destruction of language, voices, and other viewpoints is a trademark of these men. If they do not leave behind their own stories or names, they leave nothing but blankness.

Considering this, it is only fitting that the defense against the fukú and its human agents is based in language too. Yuniór informs readers that “there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word” (Díaz 7). The image of disaster “coiling” around its victims evokes a snake. An enemy of serpents is the mongoose, an animal that appears to aid characters within the novel at several points in their history and acts as an agent or representation of zafa. Yuniór’s admission that zafa’s identity as a word is not surprising shows that even in the first few pages of the novel, the power of language has already become apparent. Though zafa can be spoken aloud as a countercharm, the written word also brings comfort and hope to the characters. During college, Yuniór and Oscar live as roommates. Yuniór focuses on being “cool” and successful with women. Oscar, a genre fan, would rather work on science fiction creative writing pieces of his own. After learning Oscar’s habits, Yuniór “knew something was wrong when he stopped writing” (186). Writing brings Oscar more joy than anything else and serves as a

barometer of his mood and health. Yuniór too credits the practice as part of his transformation into a better person, saying, “These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (326). Yuniór’s transition from a Trujillato-esque “player” to a more mature and considerate man comes partly from the discipline of writing. Though Yuniór’s repetition of his status as “a new man” suggests desperation to be believed and raises doubts, his emphasis on the healing and transformative powers of writing remain. Oscar compiles a book with mysterious contents during a trip to the Dominican Republic and sends it to America, billing it as “the cure to what ails us”, another signification that writing and language have restorative properties (333). He also describes the book as “The Cosmo DNA” (333). The Cosmo DNA, from the science fiction show *Space Battleship Yamato*, is a device capable of cleaning up radiation and making Earth inhabitable. Oscar sees the book as something that can clean up the residual damage left by the fukú, healing what has been broken and allowing people to start new lives. DNA itself is also arguably “written”. Scientists represent its code with strings of letters, and although in the genre world it is far more rewritable than in reality, it still serves the purpose of telling people who they are. The book never arrives, one more lost work, but Yuniór picks up the task after seeing Oscar in his dreams holding a blank book before him. He reflects, “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a work of literature within the narrative starts to do the work Abelard and Oscar’s lost books could not. As a zafa, it wards off disaster.

By setting up writing as a battleground between fukú and zafa, writer and dictator, Díaz makes stories the weapon of choice in this war, raising the stakes of his own work’s success or failure. First of all, people have to pay attention. Yuniór’s quest to fill in the blank book Oscar

holds out in his dreams aligns with a major way to combat the curse. Within a world plagued by the fukú and everything it represents, the way to fight back is to face the true horrors of what is happening. Yuniór informs readers at the novel's beginning that "we are all of us [the fukú's] children, whether we know it or not" (Díaz 2). His given name – the equivalent to the English nickname "Junior" – only emphasizes that sense of heredity and succession. Like any children, "we" can choose to carry on the curse's legacy or break away. Either way, Yuniór's statement recognizes the importance of acknowledging where one comes from, even if it is shameful.

The urge to forget is strong. After Oscar's mother Beli escapes her years as a child slave in the Trujillo-era Dominican Republic, "that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul" (Díaz 258). The excised portion of her life is a "chapter", another lost portion of a book. Lost books in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are often a tragedy, representing a missed opportunity for knowledge and growth. Beli hides that potential from herself as if it were "nuclear waste" – a dangerous substance to be sure, but one with power in the world of genre Oscar inhabits. Nuclear waste in comic books can mutate people into horrible monsters or gifted superheroes, but either way it has the ability to create great change in a person. Beli does not let her past remake her and refuses to consciously let it have an impact on who she becomes. Instead, she hides it away within herself, and like barrels of toxins leaching into the soil, the memories fester in her soul. Her trauma warps her and symbolically arises in the form of her mutated cancer cells. Beli eventually succumbs to cancer, an invasive disease where invading cells choke out good ones, a process reminiscent of the colonialism fukú represents. She traps past horrors within her body rather than facing them outright, and her body fails.

Forgetfulness may have seemed like a mercy so Beli could begin again and move beyond her trauma, but the novel signifies that it is not enough. Yuniór narrates, “Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilled. And from it forged herself anew” (Díaz 259). Yet this abandonment is a loss of self. The pun on Antilles simultaneously undoes both person and place, severing Beli’s roots and history. None of the words – amnesia, denial, hallucination – suggest positive closure or healing. Instead, they signify a loss and refusal or inability to see what is really there. Monica Hanna points out the loaded use of “forged” earlier in the novel, when Trujillo is credited for “the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state” (3). She writes that, “Trujillo’s creation of the modern Dominican nation works via destruction and exclusion. Indeed, the choice of the term ‘forge’ carries a double valence, indicating that the ‘modern state’ is a creation while also suggesting a sense of illegitimacy, that the ‘modern state’ is actually a forgery, a counterfeit” (Hanna 503). Trujillo forges stories, making up lies that he spins as historical truth through his own dictatorial impunity. The exploration of the word can be taken further. Yuniór describes Trujillo as “our Sauron”, the villain of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (Díaz 2). Sauron deceives the people of Middle Earth, gifting them with magic rings even as he “forged secretly in the Mountain of Fire the One Ring to be their master” (Tolkien 236). The rings betray, curse, and enslave their owners, bringing them under Sauron’s thrall even as they think they have gained power. Beli’s forgetful forging is linked to deceit and evil, bound to people who gain power out of making others forget.

Escaping from trauma by refusing to put it into words robs the victim of agency. In her adolescence, Beli is dragged into the cane fields and beaten for her affair with and pregnancy by

a married man connected to the Trujillo regime. During her beating, she retreats into wordlessness. Her ordeal is “the end of language, the end of hope” (Díaz 147). The linking of the two words conflates them. Language brings people hope. Her inability to verbalize the experience takes away any power she had over it. Instead, she slides into solitude, where “she would dwell forever, alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick, pretending that the scribble was letters, words, names” (148). In this lonely void, Beli accepts labels like fea that others place on her and loses her ability with words, heightening her isolation. After Oscar suffers through the same type of beating, he exhibits greater bravery. He relives the experience in dreams where his family is beaten instead and he runs away to save himself. Eventually, in his dreams, “instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened” (307). Oscar does not become a superhero as he once fantasized, but he displays another kind of heroism. His willingness to listen to his family’s pain – and thus his own – is presented as a monumental act. He acts as a witness for them, instead of preserving himself and covering his ears. When Oscar's sister Lola narrates a portion of the story (or at least Yuniór presents the words as hers), she admits, “if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (109). Her words sum up the ideas suggested by the rest of the book. The darkness has to be confronted, pasts have to be faced, and stories have to be told. Succumbing to the island amnesia only allows more horrors to be perpetrated. In an interview, Díaz says he is fascinated by “how people ‘un-see’. How societies are trained not to see. In other words, I don’t think what determines a person is their point of view is. I think it’s what their point of ‘un-view’ is” (Miranda 29). He emphasizes, “you don’t even need to silence

[people speaking out]. You just don't need to listen" (30). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does not want its characters or its readers to look away. It wants them to listen.

Writing right: Yunior and Díaz's quest to avoid authorial control

As discussed in the previous section, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sets up murky areas where writing and witnessing can go badly in the wrong hands. This is explored further in the complicated character of Yunior, the novel's fictional narrator who controls readers' access to the story. Yunior highlights his own efforts to avoid being the dictator of his narrative world, a quest that involves working with ambiguity and relying on the genre world Oscar loved so much. In the end, though, he cannot evade that connotation as long as he is the one crafting the work, which is why he invites readers to help him in the creative process. As will be explored in the following section, the novel offers opportunities for readers to assist in its creation of meaning, freeing it of some of its problematic nature as a complete text.

All the stories in the world will not do any good if they are told wrong. The dictators and agents of the fukú tell stories or leave gaps to promote their agenda. After all, Balaguer was a kind of writer too, and Trujillo rewrote the Dominican Republic. In *Reading Junot Díaz*, Christopher González reflects on “the frustrating inability of these articulate personages and characters to write a final, finished product” and identifies “one writer who does manage to write with impunity, and write prolifically”: Balaguer, Trujillo's henchman and eventual successor (66). Although Balaguer leaves a blank space within his own memoir, it is never filled. The blankness is permanent, and his work is finished that way. What González does not reflect on is that only dictators can write final finished products. Only they can leave behind a tightly crafted creation where there is no room to move or breathe. Yunior tries to avoid their model. He emphasizes that the story he relates is not his and does not claim ownership or control over it.

Even the telling is not his, as he explains when he argues he would tell Abelard's story a different way but, "if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?" (Díaz 211). His use of the academic term "historiography" lends greater prestige to the family's choice, legitimating it as a fair way to portray the events. By asking who he is to question it, he also reaffirms that he is no more important than the de Leóns and has no supreme authority over them. Unlike a dictator, he does not claim the right to reshape the de Leóns' lives. Yuniór would prefer to start with the American invasion of the Dominican Republic or Spanish conquest of Hispaniola, big picture events, but he allows the people affected to tell their personal stories as they see fit. Of course, the novel as a whole does begin elsewhere, starting with the European conquest after all, so Yuniór gets his way in the end. (Oscar, he reflects, would not want to have his life told as a fukú story, but Yuniór does it anyway.) He cannot hide that he is the one man in control of everything.

Still, individuals are given a chance to speak throughout. After Beli laughs when she is told she must leave the Dominican Republic, Yuniór comments that "I wish I could say different but I've got it right here on tape" (Díaz 161). His words imply that he is taking oral histories from witnesses or family members and staying loyal to their contents (161). Lola's narrative point of view appears in the novel at times to recall her thoughts and experiences. She speaks in the first person, the only other character given that privilege. The presence of a female voice is anti-dictatorial, considering the violence against women characteristic of the Trujillato. Yuniór's choice to use Lola's words directly shows his respect for her, respect Trujillo never shows his female victims. At one point, Yuniór references "The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted" which is apparently a common story on the island (244). Yuniór frequently reminisces about Lola, one girl he truly loved in his player days, who turned her back on him and his womanizing behavior.

Lola is the girl he wanted and who got away, and now he tells her story too. His saving grace is that he does not talk about Lola in the same terms. She is a person to him. He also does not exercise dictatorial power to claim her within the fictional universe he creates by writing himself a happier ending. Yuniór cites attempts to go through records and look at old photographs, documenting his research process. This gives the impression of thoroughness and effort to be objective, since dictators, as he says, do not leave a paper trail. Although blank pages left in history by oppressors or stubborn silences on the part of the victims sometimes stymie him, he does his best to tell the story right.

Writing grants Yuniór power within the novel, but the power is not unequivocally good. In “The Writer as Superhero”, Anne Mahler casts both Oscar and Yuniór as superheroes due to their identity as writers who have the power to speak out against oppressive regimes. Conflating the two roles, she writes, “The hero-writer’s taking up of the pen is a counter-gesture in which the placement of ink on the page reveals that which the tyrannical power seeks to suppress” (Mahler 131). Yuniór in particular “becomes a superhero in the novel, one who attempts to keep the forces of tyranny in check” (Mahler 132). Yuniór’s writing is not always a force checking tyranny, though. At times, especially early in his life, he replicates the language and tone of dictatorship. Initially, his writing centers on violence. He describes his fiction as “all robberies and drug deals and *Fuck you, Nando*, and BLAU! BLAU! BLAU!” (Díaz 173). The loud sound effects are reminiscent of comic books, but gunfire and violence are things dealt more by oppressors than heroes in the history of Dominican Republic. Trujillo is the chief robber of the Dominican Republic as well, referred to as “the Failed Cattle Thief”, and the act of robbery can be tied to the theft of the New World by European conquest (Díaz 2). The inclusion of “Fuck you” is particularly telling, since it is the English profanity hidden within the fukú’s name, as

Oscar realizes shortly before his death. By sharing this excerpt from his writing, Yuniór suggests that he too is perpetuating the curse.

Oscar's story and its aftermath help turn Yuniór in a new direction. After living with Oscar, his style shifts and he writes a story

about the woman who used to live in the patio behind my house in the DR, a woman everybody said was a prostitute but who used to watch me and my brother while my mom and my abuelo were at work. My professor couldn't believe it. I'm impressed. Not a single shooting or stabbing in the whole story. Not that it helped any. I didn't win any of the creative-writing prizes that year. I kinda had been hoping (Díaz 196).

Yuniór's change in genres suggests some level of change in himself. Rather than sexualizing the woman in a pattern similar to that of the Trujillato, he reflects on the good she did for him and his family. He moves away from narratives of gratuitous violence – no longer “dictating” harm against bodies – and toward reflections of home and family life in the Dominican Republic, revisiting his youth in a way Beli is unwilling to do. At the same time, though, this younger Yuniór still sees writing as a means to an end. He is disappointed that he does not get a reward and claims the change in subject matter did not help any, failing to see that it can accomplish things outside of accolades or monetary prizes. Indeed, Yuniór remains a questionable figure throughout the novel, both as a character and as a narrator years later. Clues left in his telling or lack thereof remind readers that no single voice should ever reign supreme.

Despite the novel's attempts to present a multiplicity of voices, it imposes a dominant voice of its own. Elena Machado Sáez observes that Díaz's choice to create a fictional narrator within the work reminds readers of the constructed nature of the account before them, “pulling back the veil of an omniscient voice” (527). Yuniór filters everything within the novel, choosing which records to look at and what to relate. Lola may speak, but Yuniór writes her down. He mentions in an aside that Lola sometimes called Oscar Mister and “Later she'd want to put that

on his gravestone but no one would let her, not even me. Stupid” (Díaz 36). In that instance, he does prevent her words, although the “Stupid” suggests he looks back on that act with shame. Like Balaguer, he leaves gaps in the narrative and admits, “Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco” (Díaz 149). He leaves the narrative incomplete. Whether that demonstrates any less impunity than Balaguer is left uncommented on, but it demonstrates that he retains and is willing to wield the authorial power of keeping things covered up.

Yunior shows his flaws. Even at the end of the novel, when he insists on being “a new man”, he says, “I don’t run around after girls anymore. Not as much, anyway” (Díaz 326). His womanizing is one of his closest links to Trujillo, famed for having sex with untold numbers of women. Even after all his apparent maturation, Yunior cannot let that behavior go completely. Trujillo is famous “for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women” (2). His sexual appetite and conviction that all women belong to him pops up again and again in the story, including engineering the demise of Beli’s family. Trujillo’s lust is one more weapon he wields against the Dominican people, another form of his cruelty. Yunior possesses similar qualities, calling himself “the biggest player of them all”, a grandiose statement that places him above Trujillo in terms of womanizing (186). He describes himself as, “Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn’t even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me, who had pussy coming out of my ears” (185). The use of “fucking”, a crude profanity that shares letters in common with the fukú, ties this behavior back to the curse. Yunior is not only “fucking” the women; he is “fucking with” them, the implication being that he is mistreating them in some way - particularly as he is cheating on them and deceiving them. He refers to them as bitches, sluts, and pussy, using misogynistic and

objectifying terms, reducing them to genitalia that he can scoop up. The derogatory language leaves him little better than Trujillo. Díaz highlights their misogynistic link in an interview and adds,

you could draw a direct line in Dominican society from Trujillo to Yuniór. Yuniór takes the present role of the dictator – in the past Trujillo was the dictator, he was the only one who spoke. In this novel, in the present, Yuniór’s the only one who speaks. He’s literally the dictator (Miranda 36).

Yuniór has control over the narrative and in some places acknowledges the novel as a written work with inaccuracies and aesthetic choices, leaving it ambiguous how much he has changed within the text.¹ He is not Trujillo, but his position places him in a similar role – the other half of the dictator-writer struggle for power. Sáez observes that “even within the diaspora a silencing can occur, because the diaspora is also conditioned by the logic of a nation” (525). Not being Trujillo is not enough. The societal impact of the fukú continues to impact everyone touched by it, to the extent that Lola says, “Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (Díaz 324). Yuniór too is capable of perpetuating the curse, even as he seeks to work a zafa to counter it. Lurking behind him is Díaz himself, the one man in control of everything. He too inescapably speaks with a single voice. His identity as the author means there is no way around it. By nature, writers and dictators are tied.

Mahler identifies Yuniór and Oscar as heroes because they are writers, but all writing is not created equal both in terms of heroism and dictatorship. Adam Lifshey examines Vargas Llosa’s *La fiesta del Chivo* in comparison to two other works about the Trujillato. Although his article makes no mention of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, its message could easily

¹ “In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the 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!” (Díaz, Footnote 17, 132).

bring in Díaz's work as an example. Lifshy writes that Vargas Llosa's tightly constructed novel leaves behind "a general absence of ambiguity [...] as in, nefariously, the Trujillato itself" (436). The lack of reader freedom to interpret the book prevents them from exercising the freedom it seeks to defend. In contrast, he points to other pieces of literature that promote the "profound resistance to authorial and autocratic control that is the readerly freedom of thought" (Lifshy 453). Works with looser structures, mysterious symbols, and less clarity open the door for more reader interpretation beyond the author's dubious intent. By allowing the reader to be part of the process, they fight authoritarianism in all its forms.

Genre is one example of this type of work. By reading and writing liberally within the world of genre, Oscar has more zafa-like power than those remaining in more traditional forms. Works of genre, particularly comics, are superb when it comes to inviting and even embracing openness, ambiguity, and reader input. Jared Gardner points out in his book *Projections: Comics and the History of 21st Century Storytelling* that both comics and films rely on the audience to put the pieces together. Popular belief, at least, conceives of film as still images strung together for the eyes to do the work of "seeing" everything in motion (Gardner 3). Similarly, comics provide a set of still panels, requiring readers to see past, present, and future and make connections in order to give the comic its narrative (165). Although the intended narrative is often (but not always) clear, it remains at the mercy of the reader's construction.

Genre creators go beyond form to solicit input from many angles. Science fiction magazines gather large fan communities who frequently straddle the line between consumer and creator (Gardner 168). Many early comics invited collaboration, encouraging readers to write in and spreading the idea that anyone could tell stories (73). Defined by a complex and referential nature, science fiction and comics are often swept up in a tide of their own momentum. A new

writer might pick up a Superman comic storyline, but they have to stay true to certain aspects of Superman's character. Especially after Tolkien, fantasy writers face certain expectations for the characteristics of dwarves, elves, and other high fantasy staples. Genre creators cannot easily be dictators. At times the genre itself dictates the terms, and the weight of fans and precedent keep creators on track. Beyond fan involvement, many of these works are collaborative. Comics and films are often not created by one person. Directors, actors, cameramen, writers, inkers, artists, and more all work together to create a final product. This prevents a single voice from reigning supreme, as different people help shape and interpret the narrative.

Oscar operates on a similar level. His ability to speak within the novel that bears his name is limited. (In fact, it is not even his real name. Oscar Wao is a nickname derived from a homophobic joke mocking Oscar's genre-inspired Doctor Who costume.) Yuniors frames the story, relating interaction and dialog. Unlike Lola, Oscar never gets an extended portion where he speaks up with "I". The novel ends on a quote from his letter, but Yuniors controls access to his words. This lifts the dictatorial association from Oscar, leaving suspicion to fall only on Yuniors. Oscar's preference for genre solidifies his narrative innocence. As a writer, he leans toward more democratic genres. He writes novels, not comics or films, which does leave him as the sole creator, but genre's weight of expectations and community means his control is more moderated. The failure of his final book to arrive in the mail shows how integral this is to his identity. Oscar's sci-fi manuscript survives, but his other book, called a "cure", does not. In his attempt to prescribe a fix, Oscar oversteps. The cure too must be collaborative. Yuniors's choice at the end of the novel to keep Oscar's writing on ice (literally stuffed in the fridge) keeps Oscar's direct words silenced even as Yuniors speaks for him (Hanna 95). At every turn, Yuniors acts as the dictator, while Oscar remains the subject.

Yunior takes on a role familiar to comics as he attempts to present the narrative to readers in an informative but harmless way. Gardner describes the early days of Marvel comics and how the dense, interconnected universe eventually required editor's notes to inform readers of what they might have missed. He writes, "the figure of the Editor became perhaps the most recognizable hero at Marvel, and every issue worked to foreground that personality as the overarching force holding the otherwise anarchic Marvel Universe together" (Gardner 113). Yunior serves as the "Editor" for his created universe, catching readers up to speed on history they might have missed. In both his work and Marvel's, the presence of editor's notes acknowledges the work as a made thing with creators and readers. It is an effort both to create transparency and ensure understanding. In that role, Yunior samples widely from sci-fi and fantasy sources in his references and language. While young Yunior hides his interest and adult Yunior still does to an extent (implores readers not to ask why he knows the meaning of an Elvish word) he also admits "These days I'm nerdy" (Díaz 6). He also, as observed earlier, attempts to relinquish some control. Still, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* remains a novel with a single author, not supplemented with actors or artists. Its uncertain genre leaves it in a league of its own, with no tropes or audience to guide it. Yunior and Díaz's creation cannot claim the same democratic status as other works on its own – not until it enlists the help of the readers, as so many comics have done before.

Mahler's glowing portrayal of Yunior is moderated somewhat by her admission that the lines between hero and villain are blurred within the novel (135). However, she argues that the novel's ability to be "self-aware" about its dangers as a written work keeps it on the side of the heroes (Mahler 120). I would argue that its self-awareness alone is not enough. Any self-awareness on Yunior or Díaz's parts still remains within the bounds of the novel, which operates

under the same power structures and parameters as other forms of dictatorship, including using English (the language of American oppressors). Yuniór and Díaz do attempt to acknowledge their own limitations. Notably, Yuniór does not choose “The Editor” as his nickname. He calls himself “The Watcher”, a title that sounds more hands-off and objective, further away from the dictatorial role of writing. Then again, based on the frequency and depth of his references, he would know that the Watcher does far more than watch. González remarks in *Reading Junot Díaz* that “the Watcher himself is an extraterrestrial being with godlike powers (though not to the extent of Galactus) and his role in Kirby’s storyworld is to intercede on behalf of humanity” (80). Although Sáez accuses Yuniór of identifying himself with the Watcher in an appeal to objectivity, Uatu in fact frequently interferes and shows an emotional interest in proceedings (Sáez 528). González argues that “by aligning himself with the Watcher [...] Yuniór establishes himself as an advocate for the voiceless throughout the narrative – Oscar in particular. He is the Watcher, but he is the narrator as well. Yuniór is not only watching, he adopts the godlike power of creating a world through narrative” (80). Adopting godlike power is not something to be done uncritically. Trujillo is the one who placed his name alongside God’s in the national motto, after all (Díaz 2). To counteract this, Yuniór warns readers early on about the dangers of writers, and his blank spaces are presented as current rather than permanent gaps. Readers are told, “the rest will have to wait for the day the páginas en blanco finally speak” (119). Both Yuniór and Díaz go beyond playing a waiting game, though. The novel attempts to hasten the banishment of its single voice by engaging the reader to be part of its process of storytelling and creation of meaning.

The novel’s use of references (science fiction and fantasy, historical, bilingual) forces the reader to expend extra effort in understanding the text. Because of the multiple registers it

operates on, almost everyone (Spanish speaker, genre fan, Dominican, history buff) will encounter something they do not know. Rune Graulund writes that “Díaz implements a politics of exclusion, actively forcing his readers to accept that parts of his text will likely remain indecipherable to them” (34). He argues that the effect of this is to undermine “the very notion of a mainstream” and “to leave no core audience” (Graulund 35, 41). This, he claims, makes the novel inclusive despite its exclusivity. No one can understand everything, so everyone is marginalized and equalized. Graulund seems to be operating with the idea that the audience is passive, however. If they do not understand some of Díaz’s references, they have to accept that lack of knowledge and the marginalization that comes with it. Sean O’Brien, on the other hand, suggests that readers are being forced to confront their lack of knowledge and decide what to do about it. He writes that the novel “gives readers just enough context to foreground the challenge of engaging these incomplete cultural contexts”, teasing the reader with snippets of facts and figures and then seeing whether they do the rest of the legwork themselves (O’Brien 76). They have the choice to either willingly retain their ignorance (and the association with oppression that entails) or do external research. The book itself forces them into the role of assembling the completed product (O’Brien 82). Only by seeking resources and information outside the pages of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can readers get the full experience. Like a film or comic book, the book’s meaning cannot be fully constructed and comprehended on its own, releasing Yunior and Díaz as sole voices and dictators. By forcing readers to look elsewhere for answers, they ensure that they will not be the only voices heard. This helps combat concerns of their authoritarianism as sole writers of the novel. They undermine their own power.

Yunior even invites readers to fill in his own blanks. He writes about dreams of reconciliation with Lola where he could “finally try to say words that could have saved us”,

followed by three blanks to indicate missing words (Díaz 327). Readers can make guesses, but Yuniór allows them to fill the blanks in rather than dictating them. He also says “say words” rather than “say *the* words”, implying that there may be more than one choice and creating a multiplicity of options. Another blank appears when he considers Lola’s daughter Isis, who “Could have been my daughter if I’d been smart, if I’d been –” (330). Readers are given a chance to define Yuniór (or what he is not), an option dictators with cults of personality are unlikely to provide. He also negates his possession of Isis. Although on the surface he is referring to the potential for a lasting relationship with Lola and the fathering of her children, the “my” is dangerous in a world where dictators and members of the Trujillato possess and control women. Isis could have been his if that blank had been filled, if he had left no room for interpretation. By leaving that blank, he leaves her as a free agent.

Near the end of the novel, Yuniór sums up the reader’s mission through his hopes for Isis. He imagines her coming to visit him to learn more about Oscar, writing,

I’ll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her tio’s books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers [...] 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 (Díaz 330).

Yuniór realizes this “we” that includes himself is not enough. It will take someone new processing many different voices, including their own, to win. The name Lola gives her daughter speaks to the value of remembrance, words, and power. Isis is a goddess from ancient Egyptian myth, but with his love of genre, Oscar might better recognize her as a superhero. Within the *Isis* mythos, a magical amulet gifted to an Egyptian queen allows her descendants to obtain magical powers by transforming them into Isis, a “dedicated foe of evil, defender of the weak, champion of truth and justice” (“Isis” 290). Isis summons many of her abilities by reciting relevant magical

couplets, proving the power of words (290). Her power flows through descendants of Egyptian royalty, a rebuttal to the fukú that, according to González, “originates from a Eurocentricism that has historically disregarded Africa as an equal in the Dominican Republic and has sought to obliterate all vestiges of Africa throughout the society” (51). The novel frequently notes the Dominican and Trujillato-inspired hostility toward African heritage, such as mentioning that Trujillo “bleached his skin” (Díaz 2). Isis’ name recognizes the empowering effects of accepting your roots. It is a heroine who values her legacy, the power of words, and the virtue of truth who is called upon to put the pieces together. When the novel ends, all of Oscar’s papers are kept in fridges, “on ice”, locked in stasis. They are being held inert until someone comes to do something with them. Yunió also adds that on bleaker days he returns to Oscar’s copy of *Watchmen*, where when Adrian Veidt asks if he did the right thing to save the world – which requires terrible amounts of death and destruction – Dr. Manhattan replies, “Nothing ever ends” (331). Yunió may be skeptical of anyone having the ability to destroy the fukú and end the cycle of violence that colonialism began. Certainly he is aware that his own efforts are not enough. Like Isis, the reader is left with a collection of stories, thoughts, and trails to go down. It is up to them what they choose to do with it.

The faceless man: The target reader as part of the narrative

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao creates a battleground where writers and dictators can battle in a war of words and raises the stakes by showing how easily one can flip to the other side. The reader is invited to put their effort into constructing an ending as they see fit, helping avoid authoritarian control. The novel goes one step further, though, and actually draws the target reader into itself in an unlikely guise. This final section will explore the man without a face, a recurring figure within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* who frequently appears as

a harbinger or companion of doom. Mahler describes him as “unequivocally evil” due to his association with the fukú and Trujillo, a connection she emphasizes by transforming Trujillo’s nickname “Fuckface” into “fukú face” and pointing out that the dictator was shot in the face during his assassination (123). The faceless man, she argues, can be read as Trujillo’s faceless corpse, as well as representative of colonialism as a whole (Mahler 123, 124). Although the faceless man has elements of these forces within him, I find calling him “unequivocally evil” overly simplistic. Instead, I read him as a figure with multiple shifting meanings that include cursing, witnessing, erasure, and creative potential. All of these can be brought together by the figure of Yuniór and Díaz’s hypothetical American reader, who is given the ability to shape the story’s end as they choose. The faceless man then becomes a figure of ambiguous potential, one who has committed atrocities and now, while witnessing more, is given the choice of how to respond.

With the exception of Beli’s adoptive father’s face disappearing when he splashes her back with hot oil during her time as a child slave, the faceless man does not typically take part in violence. Instead, he hangs back, watching. When Beli is being taken away by her lover’s wife’s henchmen, “she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn’t have a face*. All the strength fell right out of her. That’s right, tranquila now, the larger one said” (Díaz 141). The faceless man is not one of the cops manhandling her. However, he is a cop – part of the oppressive power structures of the islands. Furthermore, the United States assisted in setting up and strengthening the Dominican police force, which aided Trujillo’s rise to power. The faceless cop is allied with the others and so complicit in the acts of violence they perpetrate, whether or not he puts his hands on her himself. The very sight of him robs her of the power to resist. Even if he does nothing himself, his presence and collusion with

the others weakens her. Similarly, when Oscar is beaten, “Oscar could have sworn that there was a third man with them and he was standing back behind some of the cane but before Oscar could see his face it was Good Night, Sweet Prince” (299). Again, the man does not assist in the beating, but neither does he help Oscar. His presence at both Beli and Oscar’s capture shows the enduring power of what he represents. Even after the fall of the Trujillato and the flight of many Dominicans to the diaspora, his reach continues to curse the families of Dominicans and Dominican-Americans. With the reference to *Hamlet*, a famous play, Oscar’s beating becomes a performance that the faceless man is content to watch. The target readers too are watching a performance – in this case, reading a work of literature. However, they also “watch” their own nation and world events, standing aside and doing nothing while belonging to the power structures of oppression.

The United States’ and the faceless man’s complicit involvement with destructive imperial power is brought up during Yuniór's description of Abelard's downfall. He reports that,

The next week two atomic eyes opened over civilian centers in Japan and, even though no one knew it yet, the world was then remade. Not two days after the atomic bombs scarred Japan forever, Socorro dreamed that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too. I’ve been dreaming, she told her husband, but he waved his hands, dismissing (Díaz 237).

The atom bombs scar Japan – the suggestion of bodily damage recalling the enormous scar on Beli’s back left behind by her “father”, the one time the faceless man actually harms someone directly. Yuniór even describes the burn on her back as “A bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha” or atom bomb survivor (257). The placement of injuries on her back is also reminiscent of the whipping scars of slaves, damage done to the bodies of African slaves who worked and died in the Caribbean. Despite the fact that no one knows about the bombing yet, the world still changes, and thousands of people die. It does not matter that most of the people in the

United States did not know about the Manhattan Project. That does not save any lives in Japan or prevent the world from moving into the nuclear age. Their support for the war and racist attitudes toward Japan help that happen. The faceless man stands over the Cabrals' beds as bombs drop over Japanese cities, a warning that no one is safe. Imperialism and domination can strike anywhere and at any time. Vargas refers to Lola's reference to "ten million Trujillos" as implying "that the responsibility for dictatorial relations of domination and social violence must be distributed more widely" than one man, and that "subjects are complicit in the systems of power that govern them" (Vargas 15). In the case of the United States, citizens can be held responsible while they remain silent.

The faceless man also brings more silences, linking him both to dictatorial suppression and unfulfilled potential. Abelard's wife Socorro cannot scream, and Abelard will not let her speak. That silencing effect is one of the most insidious powers of imperialism and dictatorship. As mentioned earlier, Díaz is fascinated with the concept of what people refuse to see. The faceless man can be read as the potential of a witness. His face is another blank page, capable of being written upon. Currently, he has no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no mouth to speak out. He is only blankness, the United States citizens who let terrible things happen and refuse to listen, look, or protest. Because of this, they are complicit, even if they never lift a finger themselves. Their witnessing potential is unfulfilled.

The faceless man is frequently juxtaposed with another image, the masked man. The comparison can reflect the *fukú/zafa* and dictator/writer pairings throughout. While facelessness indicates a lack, masks indicate something hidden. If there was nothing there, there would be nothing to hide. The masked man carries a more positive connotation, assisted by the novel's use of genre. Masks evoke the superhero genre Oscar loves, since many costumes come with one to

hide the hero's secret identity for their own protection. Supervillains may wear masks too, but the mask is a common association with heroism. At the same time, though, it remains somewhat ambiguous. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* draws on *Watchmen* several times. One of the graphic novel's most recognizable characters is Rorschach, a masked "hero" of dubious morals who wears a white mask with black spots that appear different in different panels. Rorschach refers to the mask as his "face" and only feels comfortable when he wears it (Moore and Gibbons 155). Its blank whiteness makes him appear faceless as well, linking masklessness and facelessness together in the figure of this extremely ambiguous "hero". Rorschach eventually dies because of his inflexibility, and readers must draw their own conclusions as to whether that is heroic or foolish. That openness of interpretation fits his nature. The Rorschach test evaluates people by asking them what they see in ink splotches. It invites them to put their own psychology into an image and draw out a personalized meaning that says something about themselves. Similarly, the faceless man, the mask, and the novel as a whole invite readers to put themselves in and draw out what they see.

The masked man appears in two characters' dreams. First, Oscar sees him while he is unconscious after his beating.

Only later, during his last days, would he actually remember one of these dreams. An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he saw that the book was blank. The book is blank. Those were the words La Inca's servant heard him say just before he broke through the plane of unconsciousness and into the universe of the Real (Díaz 303).

The old man holding a book may be a reference to Abelard, Oscar's grandfather, who was never able to spread the manuscript he wrote revealing the truth about Trujillo. It takes Oscar a while to focus his eyes on the book, so at first he does not realize there is nothing written in it. Noticing a lack ought to be easier than reading anything that was there, but the influence of the "Untilles" is

strong. It takes Oscar a while to acknowledge the absence that has been there the whole time. The revelation of blankness helps Oscar wake up and return to the world of the living, breaking into “the universe of the Real”. Now that he sees that the book is blank, he faces the “real” world instead of the amnesia-laced lies his mother embraces. Afterward, he acts with new purpose, and Yuniór describes him as gaining some power of his own. Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic, facing his fear and his history, which Beli could not do. He also writes copiously, spurred by that lingering blankness into recreating the work Abelard lost. Unfortunately, Oscar’s book too disappears. Then it is Yuniór’s turn to dream. He recounts,

About five years after [Oscar] died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We’re in some kind of ruined bailey that’s filled to the brim with dusty old books. He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eye holes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank and that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming (Díaz 325).

The dream takes place in a ruined castle, a European-type fortification that brings to mind feudalistic forces or other hierarchies of power. However, the bailey is ruined. Both masked figures, Oscar and the earlier old man, manifest in a place where the walls built by European power are breaking down. Yuniór initially flees, much like Oscar running away from his family in his beating dreams. The “wrathful” figure holds a book, and the image inspires the fear associated with facing the facts. Eventually, though, Yuniór sees that Oscar’s “eyes are smiling”, and he too realizes that the book is blank. By recognizing this phantom as his friend Oscar and connecting himself with the situation, Yuniór is able to acknowledge what is missing and decide to correct it.

Yunior has other dreams before this one. At first, his dreams about Oscar place them both back in college. He remembers that Oscar “wants to talk to me, is anxious to jaw, but most of the time I can never say a word and neither can he. So we just sit there quietly” (Díaz 325). The failure to communicate and retreat to silence helps no one. Yunior’s transition to dreams of the blank book represent progress, because he is open to the idea of communication. Oscar can no longer speak to him, but Yunior can speak for him. Sometimes a witness is the only one left, when the victim is dead and past the point of telling their own story.

The mask and faceless man make their first appearance together. After her Trujillato-affiliated lover the Gangster abandons Beli during a vacation to the beach, she catches a ride back home. Her stay on the beach is described as “Eden”, a place of bliss and ignorance where she lives the high life until the Gangster leaves for political business (Díaz 133). Her ride back home takes her out of Eden, exposing her to the real and less glamorous underbelly of the country.

At one point they passed through one of those godforsaken blisters of a community that frequently afflict the arteries between the major cities, sad assemblages of shacks that seem to have been deposited in situ by a hurricane or other such calamity. The only visible commerce was a single goat carcass hanging unfetchingly from a rope, peeled down to its corded orange musculature, except for the skin of its face, which was still attached, like a funeral mask. He’d been skinned very recently, the flesh was still shivering under the shag of flies. Beli didn’t know if it was the heat or the two beers she drank while the colmadero sent for his cousin or the skinned goat or dim memories of her Lost Years, but our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed but before she could confirm it the pueblito vanished into the dust. Did you see something? Her driver sighed, Please I can barely keep my eyes on the road (135).

Beli shifts from the materialistic pleasure of the ruling class to the day-to-day life of the poor. The community is a “blister” on the “arteries” of the nation, a symptom showing its unhealthy state under colonialism and dictatorship. The dead goat represents the only visible commerce, and it shifts from being an “it” to a “he”, humanizing it. The skinned, hanging body evokes

memories of slaves, the human commerce whose dead bodies fed imperial endeavors and whose capture helped begin the curse. Next to the goat sits the faceless man. He is the only sign of human life, so he might have been the one to skin the goat. Again, he is not seen participating in acts of violence, but the suggestion remains that he did in the past or will profit from it. Despite this, he is not a policeman but a poor Dominican in front of a hovel, complicating his tendency to show up as part of existing and oppressive power structures. Here, he lives with the victims. The man does not do anything particularly ominous either, besides wave. He may function as an omen. On the very next page, Beli discovers her pregnancy, which will lead to her beating and exile to diaspora. The goat's face remains attached "like a funeral mask", definitely not as heroic as the kind sported by comic book heroes. However, the two masked men in dreams – Oscar and perhaps Abelard – are dead. Oscar even warns his killers that if he is killed he will be waiting on the other side, and "over there he'd be a hero" (Díaz 321-322). The threat is reminiscent of Obi Wan Kenobi's threat to Darth Vader in *Star Wars* that "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine", after which the Jedi becomes a force ghost. Both masked men face the fukú and pay for their daring with their lives. Although they return in dreams as "heroic" figures, their mission remains unfulfilled, as shown by the blank books in their hands. Their sacrifices make the invisible visible, drawing attention to the empty spaces left behind, but someone else has to take the final step of filling it.

The juxtaposition of mask and facelessness serves as a reminder that while missing and hidden are not the same, they both prevent people from seeing the truth. The superhero mask is also a funeral mask. Hiding yourself is a death of self. Sometimes in Yuniór's dreams, the heroic Oscar's face turns blank. Too much can become hidden. The dangers of being a writer can turn you into a monster or a detached observer too. Yuniór attempts to create transparency with the

ambiguities, gaps, and invitations he leaves in the narrative, but his authorial self is another constructed persona – a “new man”. He even hides his true name, hiding behind the nickname Yuniór instead (Hanna 92). Masks and blankness both allow people to remake themselves, but they also allow the abdication of responsibility. Similarly, *Watchmen* asks “Who watches the watchmen?” Who watches the author? The faceless man cannot be identified. He stands on the margins and watches, doing nothing, helping no one. Try as they might, Yuniór and Díaz cannot pin a face on him either. The only way to give the faceless a face is for the reader to place themselves there, taking responsibility as a witness and a perpetrator. Once they have done that, the way to defeat the blank book is to fill it. Every blank spot – faces or pages – must be written on so that the *páginas en blanco* can finally speak.

Right before Oscar dies, he “imagined he saw his whole family getting on a guagua, even his poor dead abuelo and his poor dead abuela, and who is driving the bus but the Moongoose, and who is the cobrador but the Man Without a Face” (Díaz 321). Oscar’s whole family, dead and alive, gets on the bus. All of them have been tainted by a curse reaching back generations, brought about by colonialism. All of them need to climb onto the transportation from the curse to salvation, which means recognizing their history, past, and suffering. The cobrador, or collector, is likely taking tickets or fares. The Man Without a Face (who can represent the *fukú*, the reader, Trujillo, or all the crimes those entities have brought about) must be paid and so acknowledged in order to reach wherever the Moongoose (the *zafa*) wants to take everyone. However, the Man Without a Face cooperates with the Moongoose. When individuals notice and pay him, he allows them to board, assisting and “witnessing” their escape. Oscar dismisses this vision before his death, saying “but it was nothing but a final fantasy”, so perhaps it is an ideal future that has yet

to be realized. Until the faceless reveal their faces and those responsible attempt to repair the damages they have done, the bus will never reach its destination.

Zafa, unsurprisingly, is a word, as Yunior says at the beginning, but fukú is a word too. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sets up a world for readers where storytelling can fight a curse, and both the author and narrator do their best. However, they are limited by their own positions, no matter how much they attempt to create the illusion of transparency and a multiplicity of voices. Therefore, they leave blanks in their own narrative in the hopes that someone else will come along and fill them, finishing the story as a collaborative and anti-dictatorial work. Although that person can be anyone, the hearer most urgently addressed is the privileged United States citizen currently ignorant of Dominican history and struggle. At present, the target reader is one potential “face” for the faceless man, a bystander who stands back and does nothing but watch as entertainment. Only by accepting the novel as more than a play put on for their amusement – by doing research, filling in blanks, and learning – can readers fulfill their potential as a genuine witness, working against the lingering traces of authoritarianism created by the book’s narrative structure and doing their part to face the fukú. That involves looking back, as hard as it may be, and accepting their legacy as part of a power network of imperialist domination. The only way out is in, Lola says, and readers must place themselves and their new knowledge within the story in order to complete it and take out whatever meaning they choose to construct. Although Yunior cannot see the future, and the visit from Isis he dreams of never comes within the novel’s pages (as Oscar’s lost book also fails to do), he hopes the meaning that will be constructed will be a good one.

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