

University of Colorado at Boulder

## Narrating Resistance Through Failure

Queer Temporality and Reevaluations of Success in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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## ABSTRACT

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Narrating Resistance through Failure: Queer Temporality and Reevaluations of Success  
in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Leila Gómez, Department of Spanish and  
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In his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz introduces a cast of characters whose In this paper I will discuss the implications of the particular positionality of the youngest generation of the de León family – Oscar and Lola – and their peer and the book's main narrator, Yunior. These characters have an especially complex relationship with their identities as a result of moving to the United States as adolescents, and must formulate ways to navigate both of these cultures while also contending with their status as subjects situated simultaneously outside of and in-between these societies.

These characters not only provide ways to think about the implications of immigrant identity in Diaspora, but I will also show that their experiences have a significant relationship with formulations of queer temporality. By reading this novel in juxtaposition with J. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* in addition to the works of Lauren Berlant, Elizabeth Freeman, and others, I will illustrate how the alienation that Díaz's characters experience not only extends to culture and linguistics, but also sets them in contrast to normative temporal figurations of past, present, and future. Oscar's story especially resonates with these ideas; while one can read his obsessive pursuit of women and his ultimately caricature-ish death in the name of love as epitomizing a combination of Dominican and Science-Fictive masculinities, I argue that Oscar's persistent inability to find sexual partners, ultimate failure to reproduce, and suicide attempt all trouble (hetero)normative figurations of successful life trajectories, the emphases of which are reproductive sexuality and longevity.

Through this analysis I will illustrate how queer theory can prove useful in understanding experiences of hybridity and alienation even in contexts where queer sexualities as such do not necessarily appear as central, and will provide a way to read Díaz's characters as relevant to discussions of queer temporality.

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## Introduction

In the opening paragraphs of his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz introduces his readers to the central force of his novel, the mysterious and unclassifiable curse of the *fukú*. He begins:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. (1)

Part mystical force, part remnant of colonial violence, the *fukú*, or “*fukú americanus*,” wreaks havoc on levels both international and individual. While Díaz’s narrator claims that “the arrival of Europeans unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since,” placing the *fukú*’s influence over all of the Americas, he locates its epicenter in the figure of the Dominican Republic’s “dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina” (2). He says, “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (3). Díaz positions the curse’s origins in the very origins of imperialism in the Americas in the 1400s, and, through this *fukú*, connects Trujillo’s twentieth century dictatorship to a colonial legacy.

Internationally, the twentieth century constitutes an era of overwhelming and dramatic political, cultural, and economic changes, and as part of its chain of shifting relationships, many Latin American countries found themselves suddenly in contact on various levels with the United States. The relationship between the US and the Dominican Republic provides a pertinent example of how the US became involved repeatedly and in myriad ways in the political and economic systems of Caribbean

countries and those in Central and South America. Its occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916-1924 and subsequent role in the establishment and maintenance of Trujillo's dictatorship in particular illustrates the nation's overwhelming prioritization of benefits for the US over any other issues; indeed, the US was fully aware of the authoritarian and violent nature of Trujillo's governance, but because he agreed to economic policies beneficial to the US, it gave him full political support (Pulley 22-23).

Díaz's novel deals in significant part with Trujillo's dictatorship and in its particular effects and influences on the de León family and the novel's main narrator, Yunior. The family's experiences of the Trujillato and status in diaspora in the aftermath of this dictatorship, and situated culturally, linguistically, and historically between its country of origin, the Dominican Republic, and its adopted country, the United States, largely shape the relationship of Díaz's cast of characters to past, present, and future. Yunior and his friend Oscar, a member of the youngest generation of the family, have especially complex relationships with their identities as a result of moving to the United States as children, and must formulate ways to navigate the cultures of the US and the Dominican Republic while also contending with their positioning both outside of and in-between these societies.

Yunior's narrative use of slang and his vacillation between English and Spanish provide concrete evidence of his subjectivity between cultures, while Oscar's adoption of neither colloquial English nor colloquial Spanish, but rather the language of comic books and science fiction romances, demonstrates the depth and extent of his outsider status. These characters not only provide ways to think about the implications of immigrant identity in diaspora, but also have a significant relationship to queer versions of

temporality and conceptions of failure. By reading this novel in juxtaposition with the work of J. Halberstam it becomes clear that the alienation Díaz's characters experience not only extends to culture and language, but also sets them in contrast to normative figurations of temporality, and ultimately to success, as understood in Western cultural terms. Oscar's story especially resonates with these ideas; while one can read his obsessive pursuit of women and his ultimately caricature-ish death in the name of love as epitomizing a combination of Dominican and Science-Fictive masculinities, his persistent inability to find sexual partners, ultimate failure to reproduce, and suicide attempt all trouble normalized figurations of successful life trajectories, characterized by reproductive sexuality and longevity. It thus becomes possible to understand how queer theory can prove useful in reading experiences of alienation and failure even in contexts where queer sexualities as such do not necessarily appear.

Much of Halberstam's work focuses on life trajectories and the dominant arrangements of time that characterize narratives of success and failure in contemporary western life. This work draws attention to the fact that the normalizations of specific ways of living and the pathologization of others construct these narratives, and to how such characterizations in turn valorize certain ways of being. In the introduction to *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam provides an example of how normative temporal sequences function in these narratives, stating:

In Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any

circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity. (4)

This passage points out what social conceptions of a properly organized timeline look like, and highlights how they work through systems of both social and institutional approbation and pathologization. By drawing attention to the valorization of some uses of time over others, Halberstam makes possible a reevaluation of the criteria used; according to this proposed assessment, approval on a social or cultural level is not based on individual evaluation of effectiveness, or even assessment of happiness, but rather depends on specific, predetermined priorities and choices. According to Halberstam, these choices must include maturation over time; the pursuit a long life, and all of the health-related, career, financial, social, and economic choices that go along with this pursuit; and a life-trajectory that involves (heterosexual) marriage followed by reproductive sexuality (5).

While such temporal frameworks dominate depictions of successful lives, Halberstam addresses the fact that, not only do alternatives exist to these depictions, but such alternatives also constitute a lived reality for many people. To understand the roles of these other lives, one must first understand Halberstam's formulation of "queer time." Halberstam uses the term "queer" to refer to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). More specifically, queer time encompasses "specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). The notion of queerness, for Halberstam, is connected to but not limited by sexual orientation; while people whose



sexual practices or identities place them outside of a heterosexual or heteronormative framework often by default or of necessity do organize their lives in contrast to the normative narratives Halberstam describes, these are not the only individuals who do so. Halberstam refers to the people who live “outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production” and who, therefore, “also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation” (10). These types of individuals would include “club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed” (10). According to Halberstam’s logic, regardless of an individual’s sexual orientation, these types of people constitute “queer subjects” because of the fact that they:

live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and the family. (10)

Thus, queerness for Halberstam becomes legible not only in the existence of sexuality outside of a heteronormative framework, but in organizations of time that constitute disruptions, intentional or not, of narratives established as acceptable or desirable. For Halberstam, individuals and the lives they create become queer as a result of the ways they use and move around in time and space.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam in a sense continues the work of *In a Queer Time and Place* by illustrating the alternatives queer life narratives can create, exploring how, or through what criteria, lives and decisions get figured as successes or failures. This book, however, is not simply “arguing for a reevaluation of these standards

of passing and failing,” but works instead to “dismantle the logics of success and failure with which we currently live,” and indeed to explore the possibilities that failure might open up (2). Halberstam takes a closer look at the queer lives and the embodiments of queer temporalities on which *Queer Time* elaborates, and articulates ways of understanding failure to adhere to temporal figurations and life trajectories constructed as successful as capable of both producing alternatives to hegemonic frameworks and illuminating possibilities. The introduction posits that, “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (3).

Halberstam elaborates:

The social worlds we inhabit, after all, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not inevitable; they were not always bound to turn out this way, and what’s more, in the process of producing *this* reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge, and ways of being have been discarded. (9)

By failing, or deviating from the path towards success, one actually leaves open as options all of the other, various paths that success would foreclose. Halberstam illustrates the limited scope of cultural constructions of success, and draws attention to the open-endedness and unpredictability that become available to those who either choose or end up in failure.

Reading Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in light of Halberstam’s theories on queer time, queer lives, and the possibilities of failure allows for a fruitful analysis of the structure, content, and characters in Díaz’s narrative. While the novel itself enjoys extensive commercial and critical success, one can argue that this

success has resulted, paradoxically, either in spite of or perhaps because of an obdurate insistence on failure; Díaz's narrator, Yunior, moves constantly between English and Spanish and between formal academic language and slang; the book's content is clearly fictional, but it is heavily influenced by the historical facts of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, and incorporates science fiction, comic book, and high literary references with almost equal spontaneity; and Yunior consistently both affirms the truthfulness of his narrative and emphasizes the necessity of questioning it. As such, the novel fails to fall neatly into any established category, genre, or even language. On the level of the plot, Díaz's titular character Oscar also definitively fails to achieve or embody any of the standards of normative success that Halberstam outlines: he does not fit in socially and lacks any semblance of romantic proclivity; he displays no interest in pursuing a long life, and in fact attempts to kill himself once and later willingly submits to his own death; he does not make any clear transition from adolescence to adulthood, and instead remains focused on comic books and science fiction; and he does not engage successfully in monogamous, reproductive heterosexual relationships.

Through an in-depth analysis of Díaz's narrative and the protagonists it brings to life, it becomes clear that Oscar embodies what would be for Halberstam a sort of ultimate queer failure, and yet Díaz notably positions him as the novel's hero, in the midst of a similarly failure-driven narrative. By writing the story of a person like Oscar, Díaz insists that these tales of apparent failure exist, that they will be told, and that the alternatives they depict to success in the worlds they inhabit can, in and of themselves, make possible the disruption of oppressive dominant narratives. The history of the Trujillato that flows parallel to Oscar's story throughout the novel similarly exists

underneath, or in contrast to, dominant narratives on a national and historical level. If, as Halberstam's analyses suggest, success is as limiting as it is limited to one type of story, perhaps it makes sense to think of Díaz's work as speaking to and on behalf of the therefore countless people who fail, in some way, to live successfully or to follow acceptable temporal trajectories, and in protest of the successful renderings of history that have dominated the discourse until this point. Taken in this light, Díaz seems almost to have written a novel in honor of failure, and of the possibilities and alternatives that become visible when who and what has failed is placed at the forefront and given a place and a moment from which to speak.

## I. Form as Content

### LANGUAGE

On a technical level, the construction of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* troubles boundaries that might otherwise be used to delimit success or failure, and the language the narration uses constitutes one of the first and most notable vehicles through which this strategy emerges. Throughout the novel, the main narrator, Yunior, regularly intersperses the English-dominated narrative with Spanish words and phrases. In his article “What is ‘Minor’ in Latino Literature?” Rolando Pérez provides a framework for understanding the function of Díaz’s vacillation between languages, and its significance as a narrative strategy. First of all, as Pérez explains, “ultimately, the question of language choice has a lot more to do with self-concept and one’s affective relations to a language than with linguistic competence” (91). The language choices an author makes provide a perspective on the author’s understanding of him- or herself, and can demonstrate the author’s allegiances or priorities. The fact that Díaz moves seamlessly between English and Spanish testifies and gives significance both to his own straddling of cultures and languages, but more importantly to the role of this ambiguity and co-existence in the narrative he creates.

In addition to reflecting the self-concept of the author, the linguistic strategies a narrative utilizes also interact in very specific ways with the context within which the text exists. In his work *La voz y su huella*, Martin Lienhard discusses alternative literatures and the influence and significance of bicultural and bilingual texts. He writes that, in literary practice, “Según el contexto lingüístico y su propia cultura, el tipo de discurso en que se inserta y el público a que se dirige, el escritor o autor del texto elige el o los

lenguajes más adecuados a su proyecto literario”<sup>1</sup> (149). An author’s choice of language always depends on his or her own linguistic affiliations and abilities, but in the particular case of a bilingual or bicultural writer like Díaz it also demonstrates the text’s intended audience and the type of discourse in which it hopes to intervene. Therefore, according to Lienhard, while texts like Díaz’s insert themselves in a given idiomatic context, they do not passively reflect it. (149) Pérez emphasizes the political importance of linguistic structures like Díaz’s in a US society that overwhelmingly valorizes English. He writes that, “At one level, the linguistic *mestizaje* of Latino literature functions as a weapon in the struggle against marginalization, while at another as a confrontation with the major language(s): actively creating new forms of American expression” (96). Seen through this lens, Díaz’s narration works to make apparent and undeniable the reality of “linguistic *mestizaje*” by manifesting it and illustrating that the resulting language actually conveys what he intends, or makes meaning, more successfully than either of the dominant languages – English and Spanish – alone might.

Díaz establishes his commitment to reflecting a bilingual reality in his text from the very beginning. In the first paragraph on the first page, the narrator introduces the reader to the “*Fukú americanus*” (1), a jokingly scientific classification of the popular concept of fukú that he describes as “generally a curse or doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (1). By introducing the fukú as a concept that he will explore, take seriously, and call by its popular name, Yunió demonstrates Díaz’s insistence on fidelity to linguistic specificity. He goes on to describe the fukú’s relationship to the Admiral, who “was both its midwife and one of its great European

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<sup>1</sup> “Depending on the linguistic context and his or her own culture, the type of discourse into which he or she inserts him or herself, and the intended public, the writer or author of the text selects the language or languages best suited to the literary project.” (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted)

victims,” and who, “despite ‘discovering’ the New World [...] died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices” (1). Díaz brings into play several of the novel’s linguistic strategies at once; Yunió does not name the Admiral (who the reader understands is Christopher Columbus), and thereby evinces both his refusal to name him and also his respect for the common belief that “to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours,” insisting via his language from the beginning on a greater respect for Dominican folklore than for the revered figures of colonialist history. In addition, by inserting the word, “dique,” a Dominican slang term for “supposedly,” he simultaneously introduces the use of colloquial language that will appear throughout the narrative and the use of Spanish that consistently disrupts any reliance on English as the book’s dominant language.

In the context of contemporary US society, one can read the code-switching strategy and slang Díaz’s novel employs as a deliberate eschewal of socially and politically valorized conventions of language. Lourdes Torres describes the “practice of mixing codes in vernacular speech” as “much-maligned” (76) and in the corresponding end note she explains that, “Latino/as who code-switch are often judged as ignorant or lazy by educators and even other Latino/a community members who believe that languages should be kept separate” (92). According to Torres, by incorporating code-switching, Díaz risks not being taken seriously by readers in English and Spanish alike. The added incorporation of slang into the narrative, however, gives the impression that Díaz not only understands that risk, but intends to draw attention to it through a defiant rejection of stylistic conventions in his narration.

The vacillation of the language in the Díaz's novel mirrors the story it tells, as the action moves both back and forth in time and back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Given the relevance of this narrative style to plot, it clearly becomes imprudent to understand Díaz's language choices as "lazy" or "ignorant." Indeed, the work the language choices do is intimately connected to and in fact constitutes a significant part of the content of the novel. Torres writes that, "Latino/a fictional texts are an example of a contact zone where English and Spanish confront each other and comfortably or uncomfortably exist" (92). Likewise, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* tells the story of a family whose lives and experiences are characterized precisely by the confrontations, direct and indirect, of Dominican and US cultures, politics, economies, languages, and citizens, and the language of its telling reflects that contact. Lienhard posits that institutional rejection of alternative literary texts reveals an internalization of linguistic colonialism that, notably, does not actually conform to the majority of Latin American experiences. (152) Reading it from this frame of reference, Díaz's novel works more effectively to convey his characters' reality than a monolingual text could.

Based on these characterizations of bicultural/bilingual texts, it becomes clear that Díaz refuses the valorization afforded to monolingual texts and to those that use exclusively conventional literary language, and in doing so creates the possibility for a faithful linguistic portrayal of the material reality of his characters; the language he uses, like the experience of immigration and living in diaspora, requires constant negotiation and the capacity to alternate between codes both cultural and linguistic. Lienhard writes, "El hibridismo lingüístico en la literatura, producto de una realidad bi- o multilingüe,



halla su solución comunicativa precisamente en esa realidad: a texto híbrido, lector híbrido, es decir bi- o multilingüe, o todavía hablante (y lector) de un lenguaje mixto” (151)<sup>2</sup>. The language in Díaz’s text reflects the bilingual and bicultural reality of his characters, and according to Lienhard, remains intelligible precisely because of this characteristic; its legibility is rooted in its direct relationship with a lived experience from which the text’s ideal readers also result. Embracing the failure to write in a normatively serious way and in one established language, Díaz works against the marginalization of bilingual and bicultural realities and creates space for and puts forth his own version of the “new forms of American expression” (96) to which Pérez refers. Torres points to the fact that, given the increasing numbers of Latino/a immigrant communities in the United States, “code-switching in literature is not only metaphorical, but represents a reality where segments of the population are living between cultures and languages; literary language actualizes the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities” (76). Writing this language in literature validates its actual prevalence, and gives representation to people’s lived realities. Failure in this case, as Halberstam might hope, does not foreclose options, but rather participates in creating a new mode of discourse, and paradoxically results in a successful rendering of the bicultural and bilingual experiences of his characters.

## GENRE

The linguistic shifting that characterizes the narrative in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* goes hand-in-hand with, and in some cases reflects, the numerous genres that

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<sup>2</sup> “Linguistic hybridity in literature, the product of a bi- or multilingual reality, finds its communicative solution precisely in that reality: towards a hybrid text, a hybrid reader, that is to say bi- or multilingual, or even still one who is a speaker (and reader) of a mixed language” (151).

Díaz incorporates in situating his account. In what T.S. Miller calls an “extreme blending of genres and traditions,” the novel includes characteristics reminiscent of the “*New Yorker* aesthetic, the immigrant novel, the family saga, the secret history, the Latin American *novela del dictador* (dictator novel), the growing body of Dominican American literature,” and the “African Diaspora tradition” (92). José David Saldívar similarly writes that the chapters “dizzily mix the literary modes of the Bildungsroman (Oscar and Yunior’s college education in love) and the historical novel, with Oscar’s science fiction phantasms and Yunior’s Greater Antillean story of the *fukú americanus*” (128). In other words, just as the narrative vacillates between languages and linguistic styles, the novel also fails to clearly draw from one particular literary genre. One of the most frequently cited instances of this combination of genres appears in the first footnote the narrator inserts, which gives a rough summary of Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship, or the Trujillato. The narrator explains:

Trujillo, (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. (2)

In this passage alone, the narrator seamlessly incorporates both historical fact and science fiction references, in addition to English, Spanish (“caudillo,” “personaje”), and slang (“Fuckface,” “made his ass up”). He does not announce the changes in genre or language before they happen, nor does he provide any specific explanation for them; he does not translate the words in Spanish, or offset them with italics, and he names Sauron and Arawn as though they might be figures recognizable as part of a collective cultural history, rather than references to science fiction characters that only people with a specific knowledge set would understand.

It would be possible to read Díaz’s choices for his narrator as, on some level, failing; his use of English, Spanish, and slang makes it so that he does not speak to the greatest possible public linguistically, and his cultural references are only available to aficionados of a definitively marginal literary genre. Yet, it would again be a mistake to read these choices as ineffective, or as failures in the context of what Díaz actually aims to accomplish. Saldívar claims that Díaz’s narrator Yunion explains “the origins and developments of the *fukú americanus* by bringing together local Antillean folklore, Creole double consciousness, and planetary fantasy and science fiction imaginative literature,” and, by doing so, presents “a diversalist knowledge on a geohistorical location so that he can fully map out and emplot Oscar de León’s tumultuous life history in his novel” (126). Like the language choices Díaz makes, the genres he uses to tell this story enable his narrator to create a figurative reflection of the reality of the characters he wants to portray and add to the effectiveness of the narrative he constructs.

The reader receives most of the history of the de León family and Oscar's life through Yunior, who describes in detail Oscar's interest in science fiction and fantasy.

Yunior tentatively justifies Oscar's love of these genres, proposing:

It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocated to New Jersey – a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I'm guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. (Díaz 21-22)

In this passage, Yunior argues that science fiction might actually present a legitimate analogy for Oscar's experience of the world; given the dramatic changes involved in moving between the Dominican Republic and the United States, a "realistic" narrative might not adequately approximate such an intense and jarring experience. This idea suggests by implication that there is nothing more inherently true to human experience in a linear, realistic narrative than one that uses science fiction, and this perspective clearly comes through in the strategies Yunior uses to narrate his version of Dominican history and the de León family's experience of the Trujillato and Dominican diaspora. By utilizing all of these genres side by side he illustrates the usefulness of each in his story and, by extension, dismantles any sense of hierarchy among them. Miller explains that this combination of genres illustrates that, "how [Yunior] narrates his story remains ever incomplete, reflecting back upon his idea that no one genre...can offer a complete or universal picture of the world" (98). To tell the full story would be impossible due to limits of space, perspective, and access to information, but Yunior makes use of as many

tools as he can, language and genre included, in his attempt at approximating fidelity to this history.

In refusing to narrate the novel according to the conventions of genre, Díaz is able to create a space that reflects the realities of his protagonists. He works between and outside of traditional genres, and thus creates space for the emergence of a different mode of expression. By refusing a hierarchy among genres, he draws attention to the insufficiency and failure of all genres to truly encapsulate or tell any story in its entirety, and reveals the potential of new narrative forms.

#### NARRATIVE: FICTION, NONFICTION, AND THE “REAL STORY”

Implicit in Díaz’s combination of genres, including the fluid juxtaposition of history with fiction, is the question of whether historical narratives, based on the reconstruction of transpired events, necessarily carry with them a guarantee of truth more assuredly than fictional narratives do. In Yuniors description of Oscar’s first encounter with Ybón, he asks, “Would it be better if I had Oscar meet Ybón at the World Famous Lavacarro, where Jahrya works six days a week, where a brother can get his head *and* his fenders polished while he waits, talk about convenience? Would this be better? Yes?” Then, he goes on to explain, “But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (Díaz 285). This passage draws attention to several functions of the narration itself, and to a distinction between genre and truthfulness. First, he highlights the presence and influence of his own narration, and draws attention to the selection of information and stylistic choices that all narratives carry. As narrator, he chooses what to include and

what not to include, and could just as easily manufacture and convey events that did not, in fact, transpire, as ones that did. Secondly, he makes a distinction between fictions and lies; he indicates that to include fiction does not necessarily mean not to tell the truth.

In creating these distinctions, Yuniór illustrates the readers' reliance on the choices of the narrator for the information they receive. He insists on the importance of relaying truth in the story he tells, but he also acknowledges and justifies his inclusion of historically inaccurate details. As Hanna writes, "He notes the necessity of historically inaccurate details [...] justifying them for aesthetic reasons, suggesting to the reader that history is a construction as well, and, just like storytelling, it requires narrative choices" (508). Patteson expands upon this idea, pointing out that "Yuniór's supposedly true account also contains an overwhelming amount of information that he could hardly have gleaned from either Lola or her mother" (11). He notes that Yuniór:

reports generously on matters that no one could have told him about, such as the content of a nightmare visited on Socorro, the mother that Beli never knew, and details of Abelard's incarceration in the notorious Nigüa prison, when he was isolated from the world. (11)

It becomes clear that Yuniór makes blatant transgressions in his role as character/narrator, openly revealing his alterations of details, and including information to which he, for various reasons, could not have access. In a sense, he simply draws attention to the fictional nature of the entire story, but one could argue that, in doing so, he breaks the contract that, as narrator, he makes with his readers; he first purports to tell a true story, and then later gives himself up as not actually telling the whole truth.

One could also understand, however, that in bringing to light his own narrative choices, he by extension reveals that all narratives are composed of selected, or even simply the available, bits of information. As stated earlier, in addition to emphasizing the influence and power a narrator possesses, the passage above also distinguishes between nonfiction and truth. Though, as Yunion states, he has “thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi into the mix” (285), the narrative has not, by the inclusion of fiction, become untrue; by affirming the presence of fiction in the “true” account, he suggests that conveying truth does not rely on the exclusive use of non-fiction. An extension of this idea is that, though a narrative may consist exclusively of non-fiction it may not necessarily convey truth. H. Porter Abbott explores the relationship between non-fiction and truth, and explains that while nonfictional narratives do not have as much flexibility in the resources they use as fictional ones:

this has not prevented historians from selecting for their narrative certain details rather than others, coming back to some of them for emphasis, orchestrating stretches of suspense and moments of disclosure, developing perspective through focalization and voice – in short deploying what can only be called narrative technique. (155)

Therefore, “the past is infused with meaning through the process of narrativization. Facts, in short, don’t speak for themselves. They must be interpreted. And interpreting facts as they proceed in time requires turning them into a story” (155). While nonfiction theoretically uses facts and transpired events as its points of departure, the necessity of a narrative requires the subjective interpretation and selection, by the author/narrator, of events and facts recorded and conveyed.

Yunior's narration brings constant attention to his role as arbiter of information, and he explicitly discusses the choices he must make, but also makes clear limitedness of the information he will be able to provide. Hanna writes, "Yunior often explicitly rejects the possibility of recovering an original, whole story because so much of the history he wishes to recover has been violently suppressed and shrouded in silence" (498). Abbott explains that Yunior's limitations are not unique, and that, "Most historians or biographers are dealing at best with an incomplete record, dug from archives" (146). When Yunior acknowledges that he does not have the whole story, he states that it is because he is "trawling in silences" (243). It becomes possible to understand that the gaps in a narrative, even if what it does consist of is entirely confirmed as fact, influence its capacity to tell a comprehensive story. That is, just as the narrative chooses to include certain bits of information shape the story, so too does silence.

To understand the function of Yunior's version of this story, one must also understand the nature of the blanks or silences into which his narrative will intervene. Yunior writes for an audience possibly located in and educated by the United States, or at the very least familiar with its history and culture, a fact made clear by his reliance on English, use of slang typical in the United States, setting in the US, and consistent reference to a "you" with some knowledge of US history. He often cynically points out presumed resultant gaps in knowledge of the US's role in Dominican history. In the first footnote he writes, "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality" (2). He points out the importance of Trujillo for the Dominican Republic while



simultaneously implying that the presumably US-based educational system would not discuss Dominican history at any length at all. Later on, in the fifth footnote's discussion of the US occupations of the Dominican Republic he asks the reader, "You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the US occupied Iraq either" (19). Yuniors's statement here makes an even clearer reference to the suggested tendency of the US to erase in its own history its acts of military aggression and interference in other countries, and its imposition of silence instead.

In his work *The Rhetoric of Empire* David Spurr discusses the motivation and strategies of discourses that legitimate colonial interference and the strategies they use in the legitimating process. He writes that imperialist discourse "effaces its own mark of appropriation by transforming the response into the response to a putative appeal on the part of the colonized land and people" (28). That is to say, by creating an impression of necessary and desired intervention, it also creates justification for this intervention. He explains how media representations of crises work to reinforce the United States' understanding of itself as a reasonable and peaceful place. Spurr writes that, in the media, "If the story concerns social crisis or disorder, more frequently than not this response will come from sources of official authority." In other words, "the police quell the rioting, labor and management leaders reach an agreement, the State Department approves or condemns the latest coup d'état in South America," (44) and thus the situation finds a resolution. Yuniors's story thus constitutes a contradiction of dominant discourses even on the most fundamental levels; he not only refuses to posit the United States as a space of resolution, but also specifically indicates its role in creating chaos in the first place by

discussing its occupations of the Dominican Republic and its complicity in the Trujillato. His narrative challenges both US insinuations on its beneficial and stabilizing international role and the silence it imposes on histories that would prove otherwise. Rather than rely exclusively on the “official history,” Yúnez attempts to fill in its gaps using details from what might typically be considered unreliable or insignificant sources, including folklore, hearsay, his own conjectures, and the experiences and stories of one particular family.

Throughout the novel, the narrative signals the silences that haunt both his own story and the officially recognized history of the Trujillato using images of blankness. In her article, “The Writer as Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” Anne Garland Mahler writes, “The gap that, Díaz claims, exists between the ‘real story’ and the ‘official story’ is the same gap signaled by his metaphor of facelessness in *Oscar Wao*” (125). She goes on to write that, as such:

the writer’s use of ink is intended to put words of accountability on the blank page of impunity and therefore, to put a face on the faceless. In other words, Díaz proposes writing as a means of exposing the forces of tyranny that have been hidden beneath the first world mask. (Mahler 131)

The story Díaz tells, therefore, works by writing on the blank pages or speaking into the silences that pervade the “official story” of the Trujillato by delving into the history of the de León family, and therefore creates an alternative, or at the very least a way to better approximate the “real story.” Mahler posits that, “while Díaz acknowledges that contestatory writing, including his own, contains the very hegemonic structures he seeks to destabilize,” referring to the power to select the information presented or not presented, and the manner of its presentation, “he nevertheless reserves a margin of moral

virtue for the anti-colonial writing that attempts to expose, rather than mask, its own inherent violence” (134). In acknowledging the shortcomings in his own version of the story, Díaz, through the narration, is able at the very least to call into question narrative power and create a greater sense of transparency with regard to his account.

It would be reasonable, given his inconsistency with regard to facts, his consistent vacillation between genres, fiction, and nonfiction, and the admission of the presence of silences and narrative choices in his own version of this story, to argue that Yunió fails to construct a reliable historical narrative; he does not cite his sources, and even admits that he excludes or alters information. Through all of these strategies, however, he is able to point out the usefulness of subjective and fictional accounts in filling in the gaps that reliance on nonfictional narratives leave. He illustrates the insufficiency and limitations of the “official story,” particularly in cases where this story is characterized by intentional silencing; indeed, he illustrates the insufficiency and limitations of any version of the story at all, and in so doing, takes apart or at least draws attention to the flaws intrinsic to the normatively understood hierarchy of narrative and transmission of information. By refusing to create a successful historical narrative, or in other words by intentionally failing, Díaz’s narration first challenges the authority of the official story, and then gives credence and legitimacy to knowledge that the official story silences: the information gleaned from people’s experiences, from fiction- or folklore-based metaphors, and from individual conjecture.

## THE READER AS PARTICIPANT

Through the strategies he uses in terms of language, genre, and narration in his novel, Díaz is able to put into question the relationship between the narrator, the story, and the reader. Yúnior relates the sequence of events leading up to Abelard Cabral's imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Trujillato, providing several possible roots of his misfortune. Yúnior then anticipates the reader's desire for a definitive answer: "So which was it? You ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú?" He then answers the question by putting the responsibility back on the reader: "The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain" (Díaz 243). This passage contains several striking characteristics. First, he makes reference to the readers' desire for an answer, to know the truth for sure, without having to interpret or infer it themselves. The readers want a conclusion, and, by soliciting or expecting it from the narrator, demonstrate an unwillingness to take responsibility for creating or interpreting it on their own. In his refusal to acquiesce, Yúnior draws attention to this desire, but also reminds the readers of the impossibility of creating a definitive answer in the presence of pervasive silences.

In this refusal, Yúnior also gives himself space to take liberties and also explicitly creates opportunities for the reader to participate in its creation as well. As Hanna writes, he "maintains his freedom from the onus of telling the definitive, authoritative version of Oscar's history and Dominican history" (501) and "he includes the reader in this process of reconstruction; there is much that is left up to the reader's interpretation" (501). She then posits that, "By emphasizing the constructed nature of all histories and narratives in general, the narrative compels readers to examine the power structures behind the act of telling" (501). In speaking directly to the readers and thereby making them aware of their

own roles in recreating this particular story, Yuniors also illuminates the existence of these characteristics and the importance of the readers' interpretations and perspectives in all narratives.

By implying the readers in creating meaning and significance in his narrative, Yuniors begins to disintegrate the assumption of the narrator as sole authority and illuminates how the readers' roles as interpreters work in conjunction with the narration in forming the story as a whole. Miller discusses the reader's function, writing, "the most significant gaps in *Oscar Wao* may lie not in the missing plot points, but in Yuniors' spotty account of his own narration: we are left to fill in that great gap between the author and ourselves" (100). While the gap between author and readers, or narrator and readers, exists always in all narratives, by pointing it out, drawing attention to it, and inviting the reader explicitly to participate, Yuniors asserts the creative importance of the readers and how it falls upon them to fill in that "great gap." The process of closing this distance relies in part on the information the narrative provides, but Miller makes it clear that it also results in part from each individual reader's interpretation and the conclusion he or she draws. Thus, not only is an authoritative account impossible because the narrator can never tell a conclusive story, but even in the case that a narrator were to purport to give one, what results is always a combination of this account and what each reader brings, necessarily, to it. Miller states: "*Oscar Wao* argues – if the novel can be said to have an argument – not so much that genres and their boundaries should be collapsed, but that each reader already collapses, internalizes, and reassembles them to create his or her own account" (104). Yuniors simultaneously brings to light and dismantles the power of the

narrator. He both illustrates how narratives implicitly claim to speak conclusively and their failure to ever truly do so.

Through his narrative strategies, Yuniors demonstrates that histories always consist of composites of the narrative itself and the reader's own interpretation; the narrator can state facts and provide the information possible, but ultimately the readers determine the significance, filtering it through their own understandings and perceptions. Yuniors accentuates the importance of this filter by insisting that his is "supposed to be the *true* story of Oscar Wao," (285) Yuniors indicates he cannot actually guarantee its truthfulness, and reminds the readers that they do not have to believe him. He intentionally constructs a non-authoritative narrative to call into question the power of narrative itself, and to draw attention to the always-existent power of the reader. In a sense, Yuniors refuses the illusory authority of the narrator, and highlights the possibility that arises when one recognizes that narratives fail to be comprehensive, to provide the whole story, and to have access to any kind of conclusive truth.

Considering narration in such a light, one can understand that, though it will always fail to capture the entire "real story," this failure elucidates the need for new types of engagement with all types of narratives, and makes space for more consciously participatory relationships between readers and narratives. By refusing to allow the readers to imagine themselves as complacent or mere receptors of the information he provides, Yuniors makes undeniable the role they play in making meaning, and the need for constant questioning, or at least revisiting, of narratives presumed to be conclusive and authoritative. By failing as a figure of authority, and illustrating how all narratives fail in various ways to ever provide a conclusive story, Yuniors makes possible new or

alternate ways of engaging with texts themselves, and illuminates the various relationships that can exist, and that already do, between reader and narrator.

## II. Oscar: Failure, Alternative, or Both?

If one can understand Yuniór's narrative as marking the fissures in narrative power, one can likewise read Oscar as an embodiment of failures of and fissures in hegemonic regulation and conceptions of subjectivity in the world in which he lives. In one of the footnotes of the novel, Yuniór addresses the ways dictatorships often attempt to stifle writing through violence toward and displacement of writers and intellectuals. He asks: "What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway?" He goes on to propose an answer: "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). Here, Yuniór explicitly references the authoritarian aspects of narration, which he illustrates in various ways through his technical strategies, and makes a direct connection between writing and dictatorship. Indeed, it would be possible to think about narrative in this way; Yuniór's techniques shed light on the apparent conclusiveness of many narratives and on the control they exert over what gets stated and what remains in silence, which in some ways mirrors the univocal nature of dictatorial regimes, which often exert almost complete control over the populations of the countries they govern.

In Yuniór's depiction of Oscar, it becomes possible to see how failure and, in some senses, refusal to comply with the social and physical norms of his world allow Oscar to stand as an embodiment of alternative ways of being. By neglecting not only the existing models of Dominican masculinity, but also what Halberstam describes as the movement from adolescence to adulthood through his persistent love of science fiction and fantasy; in eschewing the pursuit of longevity through his attempted suicide and his



willingness to walk into the scenario that guaranteed his death; and through his definitive rejection of a mode of living that illustrates this pursuit, evidenced by his unwillingness to do anything about his obesity, Oscar lives a form of queer temporality that ultimately situates him as a failure in the society he inhabits, but also as a queer figure that manifests the possibility of a different way of being in his world.

Though Oscar does not live during the Trujillato, it becomes clear that its aftermath exercises nearly as much control over his life and his body, though perhaps not as directly, as the dictatorship did over his grandfather Abelard's. In Section Five of the novel, called "Poor Abelard," Yunior introduces Abelard Cabral, Beli's (Oscar's mother's) father and tells the story of his unfortunate and ultimately tragic encounter with Trujillo. According to his account, Abelard is kidnapped, tortured, and sentenced to eighteen years in Nigüa Prison, one of the Trujillato's death camps for one of two reasons: either because he refuses to give Trujillo sexual access to his daughter and wife, or because he had been in the process of writing a book about Trujillo's secret dark powers. Regardless, Trujillo's secret police capture him, and he dies in the camp fourteen years later (Díaz 212-261). The Trujillato clearly intervenes very directly in a physical and undeniable way in Abelard's life, and according to Yunior, this sequence of events constitutes the source of the fukú that plagues the de León family.

Despite the lack of a literal dictatorial figure and regime in Oscar's lived experience, the fukú supposedly unleashed on Abelard constitutes just one of many forces acting on Oscar's life; the novel makes evident throughout that Dominican American culture and broader hegemonic US society influence his experience of the world in ways concrete and inescapable, even if not literally dictatorial. The readers

rarely experience Oscar's voice unmediated by other narration, and instead they rely on Yuniór's harsh and unflattering, though at times sympathetic, perspective for the depiction of this character. The readers learn from the beginning that Oscar possesses none of the qualities his society expects of him; by high school he:

had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks.

(20)

In this passage, Yuniór outlines both the social requirements for Dominican masculinity and Oscar's failure to meet them. He describes him as having continued to grow "fatter and fatter" (16) while "his interest – in Genres! – which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with loser with a capital L," and as a result he "couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and [...] too weird" (17). In other words, Oscar has become a social outcast; he lacks the characteristics necessary not only to qualify him as a Dominican male, but to be able to make friends at all. Yuniór considers, "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21). The qualities he lacks become accentuated by the possession of others that distance him even further from acceptability. Put plainly, not only is he not what he should be, but he also actively is what he should not be.

It becomes useful to consider Oscar's double-failure – both his passive lack of certain qualities and his more active possession of others – in terms of his personality, but even more significantly as situated specifically in his body. Indeed, the focus of Oscar's failures becomes completely and utterly tied to his body via his inability or unwillingness to create sexual relationships with women. Yuniors writes at length about Oscar's perpetual lack of sex and, according to Yuniors, so does everyone in Oscar's family. He states:

Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family. [...] Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it. (24)

In his article, "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy, and Emasculation in Junot Díaz's *Drown*," John Riofrio discusses the particular version of masculinity that appears in Latin American narratives and in Junot Díaz's work specifically. He cites Keith Nurse's concept of "masculinism," which he defines as "an ideology which is produced by its social context while simultaneously affecting the stability of that social context." He explains the implications of masculinism positing, "The consequence of this ideology is that, like gender or race – with its accompanying notions of 'color' or whiteness – men are not simply born, they are made" (24). The masculinism embedded in the society Oscar inhabits dictates that his legibility and legitimacy as a man depends on his ability to fulfill its requirements, to prove he is a man at all. Riofrio also posits that notions of Latin American masculinity are in particular characterized by "the persistent centrality of sexual conquest" (25). Oscar clearly does

not display a proclivity towards sexual conquest, and Yunior's narrative obsession with this incapacity gestures towards its implications for Oscar's identity; Oscar fails Dominican masculinity in the most extreme way by not only failing to display hypersexuality, but in the fact that does not have sex at all for most of his life. His sexuality thus becomes a source of preoccupation for Yunior and those around him.

Yunior's fascination with Oscar's lack of sex is inherently and discursively connected to Oscar's body itself, and in particular to his physical size. Yunior explains that after his romantic success as a seven-year-old ends Oscar begins to gain weight, and as of this point in the novel his physique becomes a central focus. Yunior consistently references Oscar's size, describing how "He walked into school every day like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was" (19), and using phrasing such as, "Right there he had an epiphany that echoed through his fat self. He realized his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*" (29). Yunior also gives a vivid description of Oscar looking at himself in the mirror and exclaims, "The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions!" (29) Though Yunior ostensibly provides these descriptions as ways of understanding the foundations of Oscar's social failings, their repetitiveness and the vividness of the images he creates arguably betray high stakes in Oscar's embodiment.

Yunior continues to reference Oscar and his bodily excess in the discourse he uses to describe some of his character traits. With regard to Oscar's obsession with science fiction and fantasy, Yunior writes in a footnote, "Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know" (21). His interest in "genre" is, like his body, "outsized." Yunior also describes Oscar's affection towards women as, "that

gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity” (23). This description’s similar emphasis on size conjures the idea that, just as his body is a huge object in space, so too is his affection. Indeed, almost everything about Oscar, with the important exception of his sexual prowess, gets described as larger, more extreme, and less contained than it should be, according to social norms.

Oscar experiences the repercussions of his lacks and excesses in significant and dramatic ways, and it becomes possible to understand how the society he inhabits regulates his life and body just as comprehensively, if not quite as directly, as the violence the Trujillato exercises over Abelard. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler marks the significance and power of this regulation by revealing its role in affirming or negating an individual’s humanity. She discusses the way that “conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices [...] have become presuppositional,” and how, without them, “we cannot think the human at all” (57). She proposes that an individual’s humanity, or its recognition on a societal level, is not a given; to the contrary, allocation of personhood at all depends on the exhibition of particular traits. According to Butler, this recognition has particular dependence “on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other” (58). The norms of human legibility depend on behavior, but just as significantly must appear on the most basic level of the body itself.

Lauren Berlant continues the exploration of these regulatory mechanisms on the body through their specific stake in obesity in her book *Cruel Optimism*. She discusses the political preoccupation with obesity, and writes that, “every day more and more

advice circulates from more locations about how better to get the fat (the substance and the people) under control” (103). According to Berlant, almost every sector of society, from governmental to institutional to social justice groups, participates in the discussion surrounding the necessity of eliminating, or at the very least controlling, obesity. In her discussion, Berlant finds useful Foucault’s distinction between sovereignty and biopower. She explains:

Life is the *a priori*; sovereign agency signifies the power to *permit* any given life to endure, or not. But biopower [...] is the power to *make* something live or to let it die, the power to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways. (97)

The stigma that the pervasive and negative discourse around obesity carries acts itself out both in Oscar’s experiences and in the ways others relate to him. Yuniors focuses on Oscar’s corporal excess as an obstacle to his ability to become a successful Dominican male due to his lack of sex life, and Oscar’s sister Lola also highlights Oscar’s fatness as something that would be better eliminated. She tells him, “you’re going to die a virgin unless you start *changing*,” and then suggests that he “cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise” (Díaz 25). Berlant explains how the regulatory mechanisms work, stating:

Biopower operates when a hegemonic bloc organizes the reproduction of life in ways that allow political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining health or other conditions of social belonging [...] Apartheid-like structures from zoning to shaming are wielded against these populations, who come to represent embodied liabilities to social prosperity of some sort or another. (106)

The reactions that Oscar receives from his environment, from the social shaming he experiences and his inability to have any sexual success to the advice he receives from Lola, all work as extensions of biopower manifesting its attempts to force Oscar to live in particular ways, and specifically to be healthy and fit. Berlant makes evident that these processes have political significance, as the “conditions of specific bodies” become cast as affecting society as a whole. Thus, while Oscar does not live under a regime of sovereign power like the Trujillato, which exercises its power to make die over Abelard, he does live under a regime of biopower, where the society in which he lives has investment in attempting to force him and his body to exist in harshly delimited ways.

In her book *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman also elaborates on political regulation of individual bodies, but with particular emphasis, like Halberstam, on the ways normative versions of temporality do this regulating. She coins the term, “Chrononormativity,” and defines it as “The use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” She goes on to explain that, via chrononormativity, “people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time” (3). In using these orchestrations:

the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of wealth and health for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. (4)

Oscar fails to complete any of these requirements for “properly temporalized bodies.” Rather than give up his science fiction and fantasy love to create what Halberstam calls

“a clear break between childhood and adulthood,” (153) “as the eighties marched on, [Oscar continued] developing a growing obsession with the End of the World” (Díaz 23) demonstrating a continued attachment to adolescent hobbies, and a lack of interest in maturation. Oscar does not accumulate wealth or “health for the future,” as evidenced by his suicide attempt (191) and obesity, and, though he never expresses any investment in such a future, he is murdered before he would be able to get married, reproduce, or raise children (322). In other words, Oscar’s life falls completely outside of the acceptable “teleological schemes” that Freeman and Halberstam describe.

It becomes possible, in this context, to understand Oscar’s inability to make friends and his lack of active romantic life – stated another way, his social invisibility – as punishment for refusing, or failing, his society’s terms. Indeed, after Oscar’s death, Lola swears she will never return to the Dominican Republic, stating, “Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (Díaz 324). While Lola’s statement applies most clearly to her brother’s murder, one can also understand it as an intimation that dictatorship is not a prerequisite for authoritarianism, totalitarian views, or senseless violence. Instead, as in the case of Oscar, individuals take it upon themselves to watch, regulate, and punish each other. Lola’s remark and Oscar’s experience affirm that, though the Trujillato has long ended, hegemonic strategies of control over people’s lives and bodies persist; they simply take on different forms.

In the context of such ubiquitous regulation, the existence of a person like Oscar at all becomes particularly intriguing. One might imagine that, because of their persistence and ability to permeate at all levels of society, chrononormativity and



biopolitics would preclude the possibility of living any other way, and yet Oscar, though he certainly suffers the consequences, does. Berlant writes:

The scene of slow death [...] the activity of riding a different wave, of spreading out or shifting in the everyday also reveals confusions about what it means to have a life. Is it to have health? To love, to have been loved? To have felt sovereign? To achieve a state or a sense of worked-toward enjoyment? (117)

Through his failure to perform successfully as a Dominican male, Oscar, who one can read as one of Berlant's "scene[s] of slow death," points to the fact that such questions exist. He allows for an opening up of what it means to live at all when one steps outside of or simply fails to live within the temporal and corporal limits of success. In his inability to conform to them and the resultant illumination that there are ways of existing outside of them, he, by default, brings these limits into question. Oscar acts as evidence of the fissures in this regulatory regime by embodying its alternatives, and proves that its power is not totally seamless. If Oscar can fail, then others can find ways to live intentionally outside of the hegemonic norm, and in telling his story Yuniors casts light on these spaces of possibility.

### III. Against a Happy Ending: Ambivalence in the Final Chapters

The last sections of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, “The Land of the Lost” and “The Final Voyage” conclude the novel, and though Yunior recounts the events that lead to Oscar’s death, these chapters do not provide clear resolution for Yunior’s narrative. Curiously, the events and tone at the end manifest a dramatic shift from what preceded them. Though the plot continues in a linear fashion, Oscar undergoes a complete transformation, both physical and emotional, and much of what transpires takes on what Yunior continues to refer to as “miraculous” qualities.<sup>3</sup> Due to the dramatic nature of the events that follow his trip to the Dominican Republic, it does not make sense to question whether Oscar changes, but what clearly does come into question is whether or not these changes have any broader significance, as Oscar himself seems to believe they will.

“The Land of the Lost” begins with Oscar’s return to Paterson after college, and apparently to his old routine and life. He laments his perpetual bachelor status to Lola in a letter: “There’s nothing permanent in the world, his sister wrote back. He pushed his fist into his eye. Wrote: There is in me” (Díaz 267). Initially it seems that Oscar is destined to continue, against his wishes, down the same path; Yunior states that, “He didn’t want this future but he couldn’t see how it could be avoided, couldn’t figure his way out of it. / Fukú” (268). Indeed, the continual association of Abelard’s curse to Oscar’s social and romantic failings initially suggests that Oscar has no control over his fate. In an unexpected turn of events, however, Oscar makes a decision that will, perhaps,

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar had gone on a diet, stuck with it, and “lost close on twenty pounds! A milagro!” (271) “And the third time they saw each other – here, folks, is where the miracles begin – she sat at his table and sad: What are you reading?” (280). “More miracles. The next morning Oscar woke up and despite the tremendous tidings in his heart, despite the fact that he wanted to run over to Ybón’s house and shackle himself to her bed, he didn’t” (283).

change everything, and travels with his family to Santo Domingo the following summer. He ambiguously explains, “I guess I want to try something new” (272). This first apparently out-of-character decision ultimately leads to many more, and signals the beginning of an entirely different life for Oscar; he loses at least twenty pounds, meets and falls in love with a woman named Ybón, and becomes willing to put himself at risk and ultimately die for love.

Oscar considers meeting Ybón “the start of his *real* life” (279), and Yunior relates that, “Ybón, he was sure, was the Higher Power’s last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude. [...] This is it, he told himself. His chance to win” (283). In Ybón he perceives an opportunity to become what up until this point he had failed to prove himself to be – a Dominican male – and on one level this is precisely what happens. During his relationship with Ybón, Oscar comes to find out that Ybón has a boyfriend, the Capitán, but rather than see him as precluding the possibility of being with Ybón, Oscar persists in his pursuit. “The Final Letter,” which, Yunior says is based on Oscar’s account of his time in Santo Domingo, details Oscar’s last days, when he finally has his first sexual experience with Ybón.

Perhaps even more important than the events that mark Oscar’s transformation are the simultaneous changes that Yunior notes he undergoes emotionally. On the most basic level, it seems as though Oscar acquires a capacity for defiance. The first sign of this quality appears when the Capitán catches him with Ybón. The Capitán insists that he is still Ybón’s boyfriend but even after the he begins to hit Oscar, Yunior conveys that, “Oscar managed to whisper, You’re the ex” again (296). After this first defiant act, Oscar’s propensity for it only grows. Yunior explains the change in Oscar as he narrates

an event that takes place right after the beating, during Oscar's recovery: "One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be *true*. Fukú. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*" (303). If his decision to go to Santo Domingo instigates concrete change for Oscar, this moment appears to constitute the emotional turning point. In this word play, Oscar reveals both the origin of the curse on his family and possibly its solution, and subsequently he appears to adopt fukú as his own personal mantra; he defies his family and the Capitán by returning against all of their wishes to Santo Domingo to pursue Ybón again, and willingly meets the death that thus awaits him. Yuniór writes: "Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own" (319).

In addition to the dramatic nature of the events they usher in, these changes take on particular significance for Oscar, who perceives their effects as broader and farther-reaching than his own life. When asked about the reason for his return to Santo Domingo, "It's the Ancient Powers, Oscar said grimly. They won't leave me alone" (315). Though he unarguably returns to pursue Ybón, he also attributes his desire to go back to the insistence of forces beyond his control, and with clear emphasis on the distant past. After supplying this answer, he goes back to painstakingly perusing La Inca's old photos, confirming that these Ancient Powers belong not just to the past generally, but to his own. Responding to Lola's urging that he leave Santo Domingo and return to the United States, "he listened and then said quietly that she didn't understand what was at stake" (319). His journey has apparently become, for him, a mission with a purpose that goes beyond his own wants and desires, and that requires action on his part. In later letters to

Yunior and Lola, he tells them to expect a package from him with a book he has written. He states: “This contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you’ll need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA)” (333). Oscar believes that he has found a cosmic or timeless “cure,” with effects thus pertinent to past, present, and future. The rhetoric he uses betrays a belief in his own crucial role in delivering this salvation, implying that he has taken on the role of a superhero, or designated himself as such.

Acquiring this role makes it possible for Oscar to accept even his death with an evident sense of invincibility. In the moments just before his death, he shares this confidence with the evangelical taxi driver, Clives: “Oscar laughed a little too through his broken mouth. Don’t worry, Clives, he said. They’re too late” (321). His laughter, juxtaposed with these words, makes clear the absurdity of their attempts to stop him even by killing him, though it seems prudent to note that the Capitán’s men hope only to stop him from pursuing Ybón while Oscar clearly has something more significant in mind. He drives this point home by going on to deliver a speech to these men, who had beat him up in the cane fields on his first visit and will kill him momentarily in the same place.

Yunior describes the scene:

He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things, and if anybody knew this to be true it was him. [...] He told them that it was only because of her love that he’d been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop. (321)

He also says he will be waiting for them after death where “he wouldn’t be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he’d be a hero, an avenger” (321-322).

While the exact nature of Oscar’s cure remain ambiguous, it becomes clear that he believes in the vast scope of its significance, and that love has given him the ability to do it.

Though he never states it explicitly, it becomes possible to think about Oscar’s cure as relevant to the idea of return, or of revisiting; his love for Ybón gives him the courage to return to the Dominican Republic, where the fukú on his family began and the original fukú of the Admiral, or Christopher Columbus, first hit land in the “New World.” He gets murdered for pursuing love in defiance of the Capitán, a representative of imperial power, in the same cane fields where his mother had been beaten for the same reason as a result of her relationship with the Gangster, also a representative of imperial power, and where the original victims of forced diaspora, the African slaves, certainly died at similar hands centuries earlier. Oscar’s promised final project never reaches its intended hands, according to Yuniór, but based on Oscar’s hints and behavior it most likely consists of revisiting his family’s history through a re-exploration of or communication with the Ancient, or pre-colonial, Powers. In a sense, Yuniór’s narrative takes over where Oscar’s cannot because it gets lost; Yuniór takes it upon himself to revisit and reconstruct the history of the Cabral-de León family and its interactions with the Trujillato in the context of Dominican history as best he can from the notes Oscar has collected and left, and presents it, along with Oscar’s own story, for the reader’s consideration.

Oscar becomes able to accept his death because of his belief in the stakes of his discoveries and their capacity, it appears, for radical transformation, but it remains unclear whether his work and death do ultimately accomplish anything. While exploring Oscar's notes, Yunion comes across one circled comic square, uncharacteristic for any book of Oscar's. The square depicts a scene that takes place after the characters Dr. Manhattan and Veidt have succeeded in saving the world. Veidt asks, "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end." Dr. Manhattan responds: "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (331). The importance of this square to Oscar might indicate that he understands that bringing an end to the fukú may not be possible, and in fact that it may never have been. Reading Oscar's story in this sense allows one to read its ending as successful; the perpetual nature of the fukú makes necessary a continual revisiting of its origins and effects, which Oscar himself carries out and Yunion attempts to give voice to in his narrative. Indeed, the structure of the novel itself reflects the elusiveness of resolution in this context, and how difficult it would be to narrate a legitimate ending. The section "The Final Voyage" is followed by "The End of the Story," followed by an unnamed chapter that starts with "It's almost done. Almost over," followed by "The Final Letter." In a sense Yunion writes multiple endings, and ultimately gives Oscar the final word. The last phrases, "The beauty! The beauty!" reflect a sense of optimism, and appear to finish the novel on this note. Notably, however, this final scene transpires temporally before Oscar's death; the ending of the novel does not narrate the temporal end, but instead returns to the days approximating it, already illustrating that the end of Oscar's life does not constitute the end of the story, and thus avoids finality and any sense of total closure.

Near the beginning of the novel, Yunion states that his narrative may in fact comprise his own attempt at a zafa. He writes,

As I'm sure you've guessed by now, I have a fukú story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot – fukú number one – but I can't. Mine ain't the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful. It just happens to be the one that's got its fingers around my throat. (6)

He makes clear that this fukú story to which he refers is Oscar's story when he goes on to speculate, "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). In Spanish, to "zafar" means to "release," to "undo," or to "free." In a zafa, the actor hopes for release from a fukú, or its undoing. Yunion intimates that Oscar's story itself is a curse on him and that he hopes to free himself from its grip. Curiously, when he suggests that the book itself may be his version of a zafa he also implies that he thinks he can achieve this liberation by writing the story and giving it a voice. It therefore becomes possible to understand Yunion's narrative and all of the strategies that go into it as aspects of this zafa. If, as Oscar seems to posit, defiance of the fukú, or saying fukú to the fukú, constitutes the only feasible response to it in light of the interminable need for negotiating and revisiting narratives and their silences, Yunion's insistent failure and refusal to conform to normative conceptions of successful narrative clearly function in concert with this strategy; he reacts to the results of the fukú, which would make illegitimate his version of history, his narrative style, his genre, and even his language, by completely disavowing its standards, thereby demonstrating that what he desires is not recognition based on normative and imposed standards, but rather to create and give witness to a new story on his own terms.



Despite the persistence and tenacity of Yuniór's reaction to the fukú, one can certainly read a sense of ambivalence in his confidence in its effectiveness as a *zafa*. Foremost in conveying this ambivalence is the fact that, according to Yuniór's testimony, Oscar's writing with the "cure" never arrives; like Abelard's rumored book on the dark powers of Trujillo that would have been, according to hearsay, so threatening to his power, Oscar's package delivering the "Cosmo DNA" disappears completely, and with it the solution it supposedly contains. Yuniór details the dreams he continues to have about Oscar years after his death. He writes that in his dreams, he sees Oscar wearing a superhero mask:

It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages 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.

(325)

The images of facelessness and blankness that until this point represent the silences and gaps in the official story and in the existing narratives of history appear again and seem to pose the question of whether writing can truly change anything at all; the vacillation in Yuniór's dream between Oscar's smiling eyes and his facelessness imply a possibility that writing might provide a solution, but also can always function as a perpetuation of existing forms of power; it will always have the capacity to perpetuate normalization of certain versions of history if left unchecked or unrevised. The dream also gestures towards the reliable return of silencing, and the constant existence of blank pages and

imperialist revisions of history. The endlessness that Oscar's circled comic square points to applies just as assuredly to the persistence of silencing forces as it does to the need for revisiting history and rethinking narratives of the past.

Díaz's novel once again resists a clear-cut vision of success; rather than an overthrow or takeover of historical discourse, which, based on Yunió's analogies between dictatorship and narration, might simply serve to reinforce or recreate the same authoritarian systems, the novel instead seems to argue for resistance through a constant revisiting and revision of accepted versions of the story and forms of official knowledge. Where hegemonic conceptions of success might only recognize a domination and erasure of the official story, Díaz's novel proposes instead a *zafa* composed of constant questioning and challenging of any and all narratives, including his own.

## Conclusions and Alternatives

On various levels, Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* offers ways to understand how the embrace of failure Halberstam's work proposes can envision and create alternatives in a society that positions a specifically delimited figuration of success as the only possibility. Yunion refuses success in his narrative strategies through his unwillingness to choose one language and one genre, and his rejection of the validity of narrative authority. He tells the story of someone who ultimately fails in every way; even when Oscar, at the end of his life, manages to lose weight, thus conforming to hegemonic body norms, and have sex with a woman, confirming his status as a legible and successful Dominican male, he ironically dies almost immediately, and the work that would transform him into the superhero he ultimately believes he can be gets lost most pathetically in the mail. In this sense, Oscar's story illuminates that attaining success as socially constructed does not guarantee actual success; even when he becomes the culturally successful version of himself, he still fails to deliver the salvation-promising cure he finds.

Ultimately, Yunion appears to completely reject the quest for success, and opts instead for resistance; by thinking about success within a legacy of imperialism as tied necessarily to the domination, erasure, and silencing of alternate voices, it becomes possible to understand that new possibilities come to light not through the repetition of this same strategy, but rather in finding another way, such as writing into the silences, giving the other side of the story, and telling and valuing the stories of those who failed. Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of queer temporality and its work in historical narratives explains the importance of such alternatives:

[Queer versions of history] cherish not only history's flotsam and jetsam but also the excess generated by capital, its castoffs, and the episodes it wishes us to forget [...] In their own version of trench warfare, they collect and remobilize archaic or futuristic debris as signs that things have been and could be otherwise. That capitalism can always reappropriate this form of time is no reason to end with despair: the point is to identify 'queerness' as the site of all the chance elements that capital inadvertently produces, as well as the site of capital's potential recapture and incorporation of chance. (xvi)

In other words, constantly revisiting dominant historical narratives provides a way to re-frame the events of the past, and thus creates new ways of looking at the future. The endlessness of this process, according to Freeman, does not signal its futility, but rather the endlessness of its possibilities.

Paradoxically, then, Yunior succeeds through intentional failure at what he hopes to do. He provides a story that falls completely outside of any social conception of success, and thus provides an alternative to the vision of it that would require him to overthrow the existing narratives and usurp the position of power for himself. After Oscar's murder, Lola proclaims, "Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (324), but the story of Oscar's life that Yunior tells illustrates precisely that her statement need not be true, and in fact works in every way to reject and refuse the dominance and authoritarianism that characterize imperialist narratives.

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