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# "Equal Partners in Crime": Narration in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“EQUAL PARTNERS IN CRIME”:

NARRATION IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

by

Rebecca Mae Holder

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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August 2015

## ABSTRACT

“EQUAL PARTNERS IN CRIME”:

NARRATION IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

by Rebecca Mae Holder

August 2015

This reading of Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* argues that narrator Yunior’s failure to capture the authentic speech of Beli illuminates the failure of narrative generally to speak authentically for the subaltern. The writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gayatri Spivak, and Scott McCloud work together to uncover the political and ethical implications of Yunior’s willful erasure of Beli’s voice. In the sections detailing her early life, Yunior draws attention to the gaps in the information he gives readers and thus reminds them that all narrative excludes and distorts details to fulfill an objective. This reading argues that those gaps of information that Yunior calls “blank pages” function similarly to the gutters in comic books. The gutters Yunior creates force the readers to fill in the blank pages with their own interpretation of events, and, in the end, both Yunior and the readers are complicit in erasing Beli’s voice from her story.

## DEDICATION

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for their unwavering support, both in the process of writing my thesis and in all other things I do in life. Mom and Dad, your prayers and encouragement help me do better work and be a better person than I could on my own.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In a 2013 interview at the Chicago Humanities Festival, NPR's Peter Sagal asked Junot Díaz if he considers himself the voice of the Dominican immigrant experience. Díaz has repeatedly turned to the subject of the Dominican-American diaspora in his short story collections *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012), and his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). In his response to Sagal's question, Díaz emphasized *Oscar Wao's* "utter particularity" over its perceived ability to speak for an entire group of people, remarking, "I've always been interested in the way white supremacy narrativizes the world." Díaz's works confront this white supremacist narrative by interrogating the political and ethical functions of all narrative, and *Oscar Wao* exposes the inherently political and ethical nature of narrative through its narrator, Yunior. In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior crafts a story that spans three generations of the Cabral family and follows the family curse from its birth in the Dominican Republic to its apparent, though inconclusive, end with Oscar's death. Yunior seems to be close enough to the family to give readers a complete account; he was Oscar's roommate at Rutgers, dated Oscar's sister Lola, and traveled with the family to Santo Domingo to see Oscar in the hospital. While he was in Santo Domingo, he gathered as much information as he could about the events from each generation's encounter with the *fukú* [curse]. Still, his account of Oscar's mother's involvement in the *fukú* has gaps of silence where Yunior fails to provide definitive information.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

Throughout Beli's story, Yuniór refers to the "*páginas en blanco*," the blank pages that he leaves empty because of his own narrative limitations, and he ultimately offers these blank pages to the reader as an invitation to participate in the construction of his narrative. Comic books, a medium Yuniór knows well, use blank space between panels to encourage readers to fill in the blanks with what Scott McCloud calls "closure" in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). He defines closure as "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). All media forms make use of this phenomenon, but the comic book medium most explicitly makes the reader a conscious collaborator in constructing the narrative. In comic books, the blank space between panels is called the "gutter" (McCloud 66). As our eyes move from one panel to the next, we fill in the blank space with an action that leads to the next panel. Filling in these blanks makes us "an equal partner in crime known as the reader," committing actions right alongside the comic book writers and illustrators (McCloud 68). In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór creates his own gutters by leaving metaphorical blank pages in Beli's story and literal ones in the book's penultimate section, highlighting the reader's complicity in Yuniór's self-conscious narrative.

In his telling of Beli's story, Yuniór is at his most self-conscious, acknowledging his limitations and personal motivations as a narrator. By calling attention to his own choices, he demonstrates how narrative always has a political and ethical function. By pointing out this fact, Yuniór complicates our own position as readers. Wayne Booth argues that readers have an ethical responsibility to engage with a text on an author's



terms, writing, “To decline the gambit, to remain passive in the face of the author’s strongest passions and deepest convictions is surely condescending, insulting, and finally irresponsible” (350). Yuniór’s narration subverts this responsibility, encouraging readers to interrogate the narrative rather than to accept its claims as a final authority on history. Ultimately, Yuniór’s meta-narrative warns us to doubt the authenticity of any narrative.

In its construction, *Oscar Wao* seems to comprise a variety of authentic voices; Yuniór’s narration cuts across three generations of the Cabral family and includes excerpts from Oscar’s writings and sections narrated by Lola. In this regard, the novel fits Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of a polyphonic novel. In Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), he praises Dostoevsky’s novels for their ability to represent a multitude of voices that all maintain independence. These voices all have “equal rights,” which speak for characters as “autonomous subjects, not objects” (6, 7). By constructing a plot from multiple “fields of vision,” Dostoevsky guarantees that none of the novel’s characters function as the definitive authorial voice, and none “constitute[s] the novelistic world in its entirety” (16, 25). While Bakhtin praises dialogic narrative, he also observes that Dostoevsky’s greatest strength was also a weakness: “It seems that each person who enters the labyrinth of the polyphonic novel somehow loses his way in it and fails to hear the whole behind the individual voices” (43). Thus, though Dostoevsky masterfully crafts autonomous subjects, the polyphony creates a chorus of voices that obscures the novel’s overarching voice.

While Dostoevsky’s novels are polyphonic, *Oscar Wao* goes a step further and places this polyphony of characters within a narrative structure that is itself polyphonic. The novel’s structure comprises multiple “fields of vision” in its array of voices, but

Yunior constructs the “whole behind the individual voices” by expanding his narrative to include multiple time periods, geographic locations, and narrative voices (Bakhtin 16, 43). *Oscar Wao* is separated into three acts, and the preface and epilogue provide a formal meta-narrative frame for the novel. In the preface, the as-yet-unnamed narrator claims to write the following book as a form of *zafa*, a counterspell to ward off the *fukú*, the curse that has beleaguered the Dominican Republic generally and the Cabral family specifically. The novel’s penultimate section shares narrator Yunior’s hope for an imagined future—that Lola’s daughter Isis will come to visit him and read his writings to end the curse. The sections of the novel between preface and epilogue shift between time periods, geographical locations, and characters. Some chapters focus on Oscar’s life, and others tell the stories of his family members, most notably his mother Beli and her father Abelard. The novel covers more than fifty years (1944–1995) with significant gaps in the events of Beli’s story, while the setting alternates between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. Yunior narrates the majority of the novel, but Oscar’s sister Lola narrates two long sections and La Inca and Ybón narrate one short section each within Yunior’s narration, implying that he documented their words. Díaz’s novel, then, represents a variety of voices in its narrative structure. This polyphony calls attention to one notably absent voice of a character who fails to narrate her own story: Beli. Her absence in *Oscar Wao*’s polyphony raises questions about the ethics of speaking for another person in narrative. Though the polyphonic novel’s strength lies in its authentic representation of multiple voices, Beli’s absence implies that some voices are incapable of authentic speech.

Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel promotes the presence of autonomous voices, all with "equal rights," but both Bakhtin and Dostoevsky presume the possibility of subjects with equal access to self-representation and thus literary voice. In her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1987), Gayatri Spivak critiques this premise by questioning the postcolonial subject's ability to speak. She argues that the subaltern<sup>1</sup> cannot speak because he or she is not a Subject within the dominant discursive community but is instead subject to the dominant discursive community.<sup>2</sup> The subaltern exists in relation to the dominant power structure, but he or she has never fully adopted the dominant discourse and thus remains unable to engage in its discourse. In addition, Subjects in the dominant discursive community cannot accurately represent or speak for the subaltern because of their own privileged position within the discourse. Spivak identifies the position of privilege that prohibits intellectuals from accurately representing the speech of the subaltern and inquires, "We must now confront the following question: on the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*" (283). Spivak concludes that neither authentic speech nor accurate representation is available to the subaltern. From Spivak's analysis, we discover, then, that Bakhtin's exposition of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel relies upon a crucial but ultimately overreaching

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<sup>1</sup> Spivak refers to the subaltern within an Indian context as those who are not among the colonial elite—from the lower classes to the upper middle classes—with a specific focus on women, but her conclusions extend beyond this group to a statement about the ethics of speaking for the subaltern in general.

<sup>2</sup> In Spivak's writings, capital-S Subject refers to the noun, or a person who is a Subject, while lower-case subject refers to the adjective, or a person who is subject to the dominant discursive community. I follow her distinction in this essay.

assumption: that every character within the novel has the equal right, and thus capacity, to speak.

Together, Bakhtin and Spivak provide a way to approach the multiple voices we hear in Díaz's novel as well as those that are notably absent. Though absent, Beli's voice should appear in the novel. After all, Yunió knows her personally, and she is alive for most of the novel's events. But Beli's connection to Spivak's figure of the subaltern poses the novel's essential narrative question. Beli represents the subaltern because of her dark skin<sup>3</sup> and her early years as a girl in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's regime. In contrast, Yunió is a lighter-skinned Dominican-American man born and educated in the U.S. and accustomed to its liberal humanist tradition. The novel's fundamental narrative problem, then, is how Yunió can represent Beli's voice and, by extension, the voices of the thousands of Dominican citizens living under years of totalitarian dictatorship. To honor those victims, Yunió's narration must necessarily fail to speak for them. Yunió grapples with this paradox by anchoring his narration with the margins of the traditional novel, using references to comic books, fantasy, science fiction, role-playing games, and other forms of popular culture, as well as extensive footnotes that literally occupy the margins of the page and provide historical context. If we interrogate Yunió's narration, we discover that his account of Beli's life uses heteroglossia<sup>4</sup> to speak for his Dominican and Dominican-American subjects through its

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<sup>3</sup> Though Yunió calls Beli "black" throughout the novel, he refers to the darkness of her skin color rather than her race.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin's term that literally means different languages. For Bakhtin, language is not unitary but heteroglossic, consisting of innumerable structures that represent various interests according to time, character, and space. He claims that the novel is inherently heteroglossic because of its ability to reproduce various characters and scenarios, all requiring different systems of meaning and representing multiple voices that still exist

comic book realism, polyphony, footnotes, and the supernatural. While the entire novel employs this heteroglossia, Chapter Three, entitled “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955–1962,” shows Yuniór at his most self-aware. Beli’s uniquely subaltern position as a dark-skinned woman in the Dominican Republic and later in New Jersey makes her story the most politically and ethically complicated in the novel. Unlike her relatives La Inca and Abelard, Beli is a diasporic subject who experienced both the horrors of Trujillo’s dictatorship and “the loneliness of diaspora” (164). Yuniór knows that speaking for Beli is presumptuous and ethically irresponsible. Rather than attempt to speak authentically for Beli, he makes an ethical choice to withhold portions of her story and to rely on heteroglossia to narrate what he can.

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within an authorial voice. See “Discourse in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

## CHAPTER III

### OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Yunior's narrative style has been the subject of critical work on *Oscar Wao*; however, these readings of the novel connect Yunior's narration to issues of genre and politics instead of taking his narration on its own terms. Daniel Bautista examines the novel's connection to the magical realist genre and its use of comic book, science fiction, and fantasy references, arguing that *Oscar Wao* functions as a subversion of the traditional magical realist genre. Ben Railton places *Oscar Wao* in conversation with Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* in his article focusing on novelist-narrators and the American Dream. Railton views narration in these novels as attempting to author a realistic chronicle of the American Dream, concluding, "[N]ovelist-narrators both participate in and exemplify American literary realism's own contributions to the understanding, ongoing development, and revision of seminal narratives like the American Dream" (150). Both Bautista and Railton argue that *Oscar Wao* complicates the genres and themes it engages, whether magical realism or the American Dream.

While Bautista and Railton examine *Oscar Wao*'s narrative technique and its effect on genre, neither critic comments on the issue of authenticity in narration. Elena Machado Sáez's "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (2011) engages with this issue, claiming, "By pulling back the veil of an omniscient voice and revealing Yunior as the narrator, Díaz underscores the dangers involved in accepting the authenticity of any historical narrative, even the fiction that he himself writes" (527). This analysis of Yunior's narration shifts control from Yunior to

Díaz and thus highlights authorship over narration. Rather than take Yuniór's narration on its own terms, Sáez connects *Oscar Wao* to the suppressed queerness of the Dominican diaspora. She argues that in Yuniór's narration of Oscar's story, "the personal becomes political" and Yuniór eventually "becomes the spokesperson for a disturbing model of diasporic masculinity" (541, 544). Bautista, Railton, and Sáez all take a narrative approach to *Oscar Wao*, but their readings connect the narrative to outside issues of genre and politics. In my reading of *Oscar Wao*, I focus on Yuniór's narrative as such; rather than make an argument about thematic issues of genre or politics, Yuniór's narrative reveals that narrative itself serves a political and ethical function.

CHAPTER IV  
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

To demonstrate narrative's failure to represent all voices authentically, Yunior constructs several meta-narrative frames using heteroglossia. The novel's introduction invokes the spiritual meta-narrative frame of *fukú* and *zafa*. On one level, this frame represents Yunior's commitment to speaking for his Dominican subjects because of their own belief in the supernatural, but it ultimately reveals his own narrative limitations and invites the reader to question the existence of the supernatural. In the novel's first pages, Yunior introduces *fukú* and *zafa*—curse and counterspell—and by doing so, he appears to fall into a long tradition of Latin American magical realist authors who include elements of the supernatural in their work. Yunior himself acknowledges the inherently magical landscape of Latin America: "But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena" (149). For Yunior, however, *fukú* and *zafa* function differently than the supernatural in works of magical realism. Amaryll Beatrice Chanady offers a useful definition: "In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter of fact manner by the magical realism" (24). In magical realism, the supernatural is never explained, and characters simply allow it to coexist with reality; Yunior uses *fukú* and *zafa* as a narrative frame for understanding the events in his story, and he draws attention to the possibility that the supernatural does not exist.



As a narrator, Yuniór has a responsibility to represent the voices of Dominicans who interpret the Cabral family events through *fukú* and *zafa*, but he also bears a responsibility to acknowledge his inauthentic representation of their speech. Thus, he plants constant reminders of his own narrative limitations even as he tells “the story with a supernatural twist” (243). From his first words, Yuniór distances himself from those who believe in *fukú* and *zafa*, telling readers “*They* say it came first from Africa” rather than “*I* say.” He echoes this distinction in his explanation of the Fall of Abelard, writing, “Most of the folks you speak to prefer the story with a supernatural twist. They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard’s daughter, but when he couldn’t snatch her, out of spite he put a *fukú* on the family’s ass. Which is why all the terrible shit that happened happened” (243). In telling Abelard’s story, he distances himself from the believers with his use of “they” instead of “I,” but this time his narrative distancing serves as a reminder that Yuniór did not experience the Trujillato firsthand. His youth limits his narration by forcing him to rely upon second-hand versions of Beli’s story. Yuniór himself says he identifies with the “postmodern *plátanos*” who do not believe in supernatural concepts like curses or prayer, but he alleges that during his parents’ generation, during the Trujillato, “the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” (144, 2).

Yuniór’s narration appears to present the reader with the choice of whether or not to believe in *fukú*. When he introduces Beli’s birth, he addresses the reader, “*Zafa* or *fukú*? You tell me” (242). This ambivalence seems to be at odds with Yuniór’s authoritative position as narrator. If Yuniór knows that *fukú* and *zafa* are real, the reader would expect him to make a definitive statement of their truth to help her understand

Beli's story. Instead of giving a final and conclusive answer, Yuniór reminds the reader that he must necessarily fail to give a complete account of the supernatural events. To claim his narrative as the definitive portrayal of Beli's story is to claim an authority Yuniór cannot access. Rather than use *fukú* and *zafa* to offer the reader a satisfying explanation of Trujillo's dictatorship generally and Beli's victimization in particular, Yuniór explains that older generations believe in the curse while acknowledging his own rejection of that belief. The ending of *Oscar Wao* seems to confirm the existence of the supernatural, but even Yuniór's assertion that the book is his *zafa* complicates the reader's understanding of his beliefs.

Besides the curse and its counterspell, Yuniór references a myriad of supernatural characters from comic books, science fiction, and fantasy. He draws the world of comic books—a world of superheroes, mutants, aliens, and more—into the Dominican Republic, merging two supernaturally-influenced cultures together. One of Yuniór's most striking narrative techniques is his use of what critic Daniel Bautista calls "comic book realism" (42). Bautista describes Díaz's mix of science fiction, comic book references, and "gritty realism" as a new genre "that irreverently mixes realism and popular culture in an attempt to capture the bewildering variety of cultural influences that define the lives of Díaz's Dominican-American protagonists" (42).<sup>5</sup> These references correspond to

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<sup>5</sup> Some critics argue that Díaz's use of sci-fi/fantasy and comic book references serves to make Trujillo's regime appear more monstrous than it often seems in other literature. Most notably in the article "Disseminating "El Chivo": Junot Díaz's Response to Mario Vargas Llosa in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (*Chasqui*, 2013), Victor Figueroa argues that Díaz wrote his novel in part as a response to Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*. Vargas Llosa's novel explores Trujillo's motivations alongside his actions, and Figueroa claims that this "psychologically realistic" portrayal of the dictator emphasizes his humanity in order to generate a more sympathetic response from the

genre, speculative, and graphic forms of fiction, and they often appear in Yuniór's historical references; for example, Yuniór's conceit comparing Trujillo and his confidants to J.R.R. Tolkien's villains Sauron and the Witchking of Angmar merges the historical references with a fantasy reference.<sup>6</sup> On one level, Yuniór's narrative references pay homage to Oscar, the novel's nerdy protagonist, but Yuniór's use of this language also reveals his own conflicted identity. Yuniór strives to portray himself as a hyper-masculine Dominican "*sucio*" [playboy], but his familiarity with the language of comic books, science fiction, and fantasy reveals his own status as a nerd (169). For all his posturing, Yuniór invokes more obscure comic book references than he professes to know. Thus, from Yuniór's first interaction with his audience, the novel encourages the reader to interrogate Yuniór's narration and decipher the plurality of meanings in his references.

In the introduction, the as-yet-unnamed narrator compares himself to a Marvel figure called the "Watcher," and a reader with no knowledge of the Marvel comic books can easily miss this crucial reference (4). The narrator, revealed in chapter four as Yuniór, sets himself up as an authoritative and unbiased observer of events, writing, "You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission's question, Who killed JFK? Let me, *your humble Watcher*, reveal once and for all the God's Honest Truth" (my emphasis, 4). Yuniór pointedly insists on the validity of his narrative by promising a "final" and "conclusive" answer, but he then ironizes his position by claiming it to be "God's Honest Truth." With the reference of the Warren Commission, Yuniór compares

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reader. Díaz responded by emphasizing Trujillo's monstrosity through his use of comic book and sci-fi references when describing Trujillo.

<sup>6</sup> This particular use of comic book realism mirrors Tolkien's own purpose for his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954), which mythologizes the monstrosity of World War II.

his narrative to this infamous “final” report that has itself been the subject of dispute and conspiracy theories. He asks the reader to “let” him tell his story, but most significantly, he refers to himself as “*your humble Watcher*.” The “your” implies that he belongs to the reader, and his use of “humble” indicates his servitude to the reader. Yuniór’s request for permission and self-identification as “your humble Watcher” establish the novel’s meta-narration but also remind readers of their own responsibility in constructing the narrative.

This responsibility means questioning Yuniór’s own narrative authority, starting with his claim to be a Watcher. In the Marvel comic book universe, the technologically-advanced Watchers “decided it was their duty to help the universe’s less advanced races,” but a failed experiment that brought atomic energy to another planet spurred the Watchers to take a vow of non-intervention (“Uatu the Watcher” par. 1). Each Watcher chose a solar system to observe and document, and the Watchers gathered sporadically to share the information they found. Hidden in a footnote almost ninety pages later, Yuniór aligns himself with a specific Watcher: “My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside, it’s hard as a Third-Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher” (92). This reference further characterizes Yuniór’s narrative voice. Uatu was the Watcher who chose to monitor Earth’s solar system, and he initially kept his vow of non-interference. As time passed, however, he grew fond of humans and broke his vow multiple times.<sup>7</sup> Upon investigation, Yuniór’s allusion to Uatu the Watcher in the novel’s introduction serves as a warning for the narrative that follows. Yuniór reveals his narrative

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<sup>7</sup> In the comics, Uatu often helps the Fantastic Four, Captain America, Spider-Man, and other notable Marvel superheroes. Uatu, like all Watchers, possesses several superhuman powers—telepathy, energy manipulation, and illusion casting—that all fall on the “psionic” range, or the range of powers that derive from energy that is produced by the mind (“Uatu the Watcher”).

omnipotence in order to warn readers of the danger of accepting his narrative without question. Because Yuniór has a personal connection to the specific subaltern Beli through his relationship with her children, *Oscar Wao* is his broken vow of non-interference. To tell her story ethically, then, Yuniór must make readers aware of how his narration controls and subsumes Beli's authentic voice.

Elena Machado Sáez has identified Yuniór's "role as a dictator" within *Oscar Wao*, a designation at odds with Yuniór's self-identification with Uatu the Watcher (529). Yuniór himself invokes Salman Rushdie's words on the topic, asking, "What is it with Dictators and Writers anyway? [ . . . ] 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*" (97). Yuniór places this connection between dictators and writers in the middle of one of the novel's longest footnotes, making it easy to overlook. His revision of Rushdie's analysis of dictators and writers appears to indict writers of the same crimes as dictators, though he actually implies that writers are more guilty of narrative control than dictators are. Writers use the force of language to dictate this reality, literally writing it into existence, where dictators merely control the reality that exists.

When he compares dictators to writers, Yuniór offers us new insight into his own narration as a form of dictatorship. Sáez uses Díaz's own words to extend the idea of dictatorship to the novel itself. In a *Slate* interview, Díaz says, "Just remember: In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters" (qtd. in Sáez 528). As Díaz points out, the author himself is the only person speaking, no

matter how well he crafts a polyphonic novel with characters who function as individual subjects claiming equal rights to the narrative. An author can write characters whose personalities and subjective viewpoints differ greatly from his own, but the author ultimately “speaks” by placing these characters within a larger narrative. This concept of author as dictator echoes Spivak’s assertion that a Subject in the dominant discursive community cannot accurately represent the speech of the subaltern, causing the reader to question the authenticity of the author’s “speech.”

In the novel, Yuniór offers more than a mere extension of Díaz’s voice because Yuniór himself is the “author” of *Oscar Wao*. In the novel’s self-conscious construction, Yuniór’s narration functions as a form of dictatorship; he curates the information we learn, often leaving out significant portions of Beli’s story in particular. Yuniór’s narrative dictatorship, however, differs significantly from Trujillo’s literal dictatorship. Where Trujillo used literal violence to silence his subjects, Yuniór uses narrative control that encourages readers to question the authenticity of his narrative. His heteroglossic narration creates a challenge for many readers unfamiliar with the presence of the Spanish language, comic book realism, spiritual language, and other obscure references, but his narrative violence breaks down historical and cultural barriers that Trujillo’s oppressive regime created by encouraging readers to read critically when engaging both his own narrative and the national narrative about Dominican history.

Throughout his narrative, Yuniór reminds the reader that he controls what we read and operates from a privileged position. In the same footnote as his Salman Rushdie reference, Yuniór relays the story of Jesús de Galíndez, a “Basque supernerd and

Columbia University grad student who had written a rather unsettling doctoral dissertation” on Trujillo’s regime (96-7). Yunior continues:

[U]pon learning of the dissertation, El Jefe first tried to buy the thing and when that failed he dispatched his chief Nazgul (the sepulchral Felix Bernardino) to NYC and within days Galíndez got gagged, bagged, and dragged to La Capital, and legend has it when he came out of his chloroform nap he found himself naked, dangling from his feet over a cauldron of *boiling oil*, El Jefe standing nearby with a copy of the offending dissertation in hand. (And you thought *your* committee was rough.) (97)

Here, Yunior again calls attention to his identity as the narrator. At this point in the novel, Yunior’s identity has not yet been revealed, but from his reference to the “Nazgul” of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, we can determine that the narrator aligns himself with the nerdiness he describes in Oscar and Galíndez. His *Lord of the Rings* reference and joke about dissertation committees reminds readers that the narrator himself comes from a specific background: he is Dominican-American, light-skinned, well-educated and well-read, and he did not experience Trujillo’s dictatorship firsthand. His birthplace is the only qualification he seems to have that renders him capable of speaking for Beli and thousands of other victims. His position of academic and U.S. liberal humanist privilege should grant Yunior access to the untold story of the Dominican Republic, but his narration of Beli’s story in particular fails to incorporate her authentic speech. Yunior fails to tell all of Beli’s story, and his comparison of writers and dictators as well as his assertion of his academic privilege remind us of the danger in accepting the authority of

Yunior's narration. By acknowledging his own limitations as a narrator, Yunior reveals the inability of narration itself to give a "final" and "conclusive" version of any story.

Most significantly, however, in his macabre joke about dissertation committees, Yunior's ironic juxtaposition of third-world and first-world problems indicates Yunior's goal for his first world readers. This joke illustrates Yunior's familiarity with the dissertation process and thus suggests he has advanced degrees. It also gains more humor for readers who have had dissertation committees, making it more of an inside joke between people of academic privilege. More than create a connection between himself, Galíndez, and the reader, the anecdote about Galíndez ultimately serves to empower the reader. Yunior suggests that writing and research, even at a university far removed from Trujillo's reach like Columbia, could pose a threat to dictatorship, encouraging his readers, first world "supernerds" like Galíndez, to be political themselves. He shows that writing and researching can threaten the rule of dictators like Trujillo and encourages readers to read against the grain of historical and cultural narratives to dismantle oppressive hierarchies of power.

Yunior's use of comic book realism appeals to his first world "supernerd" readers and encourages them to interrogate the political and ethical aspects of narrative, but he also problematizes this reader's own position of academic privilege. He highlights his reader's lack of knowledge about Latin American politics by providing a historical framework. Much of this historical framework comes in the form of footnotes, a narrative device often used in editions of books aimed specifically at students that rhetorical narrative theorists James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz argue functions "precisely to give them [students] the information necessary to join the authorial audience" (Herman et



al. 140). Díaz's novel utilizes footnotes in a manner similar to scholarly editions of books, implying a teacher/student relationship between narrator and reader; however, *Oscar Wao*'s footnotes provide historical and contextual information that is often tongue-in-cheek, irreverent, and subversive. Yunió's use of the vernacular and his off-hand tone call attention to the insidious transparency of the scholarly footnote that tricks the reader into accepting it as fact. In this sense, Yunió uses footnotes to reveal the reader's position of willed ignorance to suggest her compliance in constructing these historical narratives.

The first of these footnotes comes immediately after Yunió's first mention of "[o]ur then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina" (2). After Yunió situates the historical frame of the novel, his footnote encourages readers to conduct their own research about America's troubled history of supporting foreign dictators. The note that follows begins, "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history," acknowledging a lack of awareness of Dominican history and politics in Yunió's audience (2). The footnote reads like an encyclopedia entry on Trujillo, albeit with an acerbic tone, and the last section begins, "Outstanding accomplishments include: [ . . . ]" (3). The second accomplishment Yunió lists is "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and the argentinos are still appealing)" (3). Yunió's provocative footnote glosses over Dominican history here and briefly references the Dominican Republic's place in a history of Latin American dictatorships, and this three-line overview can be sufficient for situating the reader within a historical context.

Within this footnote, however, Yunion offers an Easter egg—a hidden message or inside joke deliberately placed in a game, movie, show, or book.<sup>8</sup> This particular Easter egg urges the reader to play the part of the student researching Latin American dictatorships. The “chilenos” and the “argentinos” that Yunion references are “still appealing” the ranking of “longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships” because of their own former dictators: Augusto Pinochet of Chile and Juan Perón of Argentina. Both Pinochet and Perón have been immortalized in film,<sup>9</sup> making them relatively well-known to American audiences, and the artistic portrayals of these dictatorships condemn their inhumane actions and stir audiences to despise both men. Yunion’s footnote, however, places these dictators and Trujillo within the category of “U.S.-backed” dictators. In this footnote, Yunion references the complicated history between the U.S. and Latin American dictatorships, encouraging readers to think critically about these politics. By forcing readers to question their own national narratives that conceal problematic politics, Yunion prepares them to question why those narratives still hold such power over American citizens.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Mark J. P. Wolf’s *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming* (2012) p. 177 for an extended definition.

<sup>9</sup> Pinochet in *Missing* (1982) and *No* (2012), and Perón in *Evita* (1996).

<sup>10</sup> In a later footnote, Yunion references the 1937 Haitian Genocide through both the *Plátano* [Banana] Curtain and the Parsley Massacre. In calling it the Banana Curtain, Yunion invokes the view many first world readers have of Central American countries as Banana Republics. He also describes the “horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and *perejil* [parsley], darkness and denial” that Trujillo used to create a “true border” between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (224). Here, Yunion is referring to the Parsley Massacre. Trujillo’s soldiers, armed with machetes, carried sprigs of parsley and asked darker-skinned citizens to pronounce the name of the herb as a way of distinguishing between Dominicans and Haitians. John J. McLaughlin explains, “If the answer of ‘*perejil*’ lacked a sufficiently trilled ‘r’ and aspirated ‘j’ to prove Spanish as their native tongue and thus their ‘Dominican-ness,’ they were hacked to death” (par. 7). In his references to the *Plátano* Curtain and *perejil*, Yunion is performing an act of historical

Yunior's footnotes open a space for readers to join him in his knowledge of alternate versions of history. The novel contains thirty-three footnotes, fifteen of which are found in chapter three, entitled "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955–1962." Besides the footnotes in chapter three, four are directly connected to Beli in other sections of the novel. Beli's unique position in the novel as a dark-skinned Dominican woman under the *Trujillato* and later as a diasporic subject makes her story the most historically and culturally elusive. To fill in these gaps, Yunior uses footnotes to educate the reader/student about the context of her story. The footnotes often deflect the reader's attention from Yunior's narrative about Beli and her children to Dominican history, a narrative choice that, again, indicates his ethical concerns about telling Beli's story because of her subaltern position.

In his narration of Beli's birth, Yunior connects her skin color to the 1937 Haitian genocide. Her blackness seems to confine her to the same victimhood Haitians experienced under Trujillo's rule, and many of her own family members associate her skin color with the origin of the Cabral family *fukú*: "The family claims the first sign was that Abelard's third and final daughter, given the light early on in her father's capsulization, was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack" (248). Beli's skin color aligns her with victims of Haitian genocide, but Yunior uses five descriptors of Beli's skin color, which comprise one printed line in the novel, to connect Beli to important historical figures or symbols that emphasize the power inherent in her blackness, presented in terms of global cultural reference.

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recovery that, while irreverent, effectively forces the reader into the margins both physically and historically.

He first claims she is “kongoblack,” referencing the former Kongo Kingdom in West Africa that was settled by the Portuguese during the height of the slave trade. Beli is also “shangoblack,” connecting her to the African warrior deity Shango from the African Ifa religion. Yunior’s invocation of the god Shango, with his iconography of the ax, in describing Beli’s blackness connects Beli’s birth to the African origin of darker-skinned Haitians and Dominicans while also subverting Trujillo’s use of the machete to carve a border between the two countries.<sup>11</sup> With this reference, Yunior implies that she holds the power of the deity to wield the ax as “a symbol of swift and balanced judgment” and will eventually subvert Trujillo’s rule (82). Yunior continues to connect Beli to powerful deities by describing her as “kaliblack.” Kali is “the most frightening of the goddesses,” and her name derives from *kala*, meaning both “she who is black” and “she who is the ruler of time” (Jones and Ryan 220-1). Kali is often depicted holding a cutting instrument in one hand and a man’s decapitated head in another, signaling her wrath against her husband Shiva and men in general (Jones and Ryan 221). With these three descriptors, Yunior empowers Beli by associating her blackness with goddesses known for violence and justice and a powerful African kingdom. While her skin color appears to mark her as a victim of circumstance, Yunior’s descriptions give her access to—at least for now—forms of symbolic power.

Because this description of Beli comes after the chapter recounting her youth, the reader already knows Beli will not in fact fulfill the role Yunior is empowering her with

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<sup>11</sup> The connection to Shango gains particular significance upon further investigation: according to the *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Vol. 1* (2008), “The Ax has great religious significance in the Shango aspect of Ifa religion. [ . . . ] The ax represents a warning against the arrogant use of military power to political leadership and represents a symbol of swift and balanced justice” (82).

here. Thus, Yuniór's description of her blackness shifts from associating her with powerful black goddesses or African kingdoms to foreshadowing the bitter end of her story. Yuniór describes Beli as "zapoteblack," this time connecting Beli to a type of fruit that grows in Central America and is very bitter in taste. The last descriptor Yuniór uses is "rekhablack," a reference to Rekha, a Bollywood actress ostracized for her dark South Indian complexion before allegedly undergoing skin lightening treatments that transformed her into one of Bollywood's most legendary performers. Connecting Beli to the Kongo, Shango, and Kali accomplishes Yuniór's purpose of subverting Trujillo's hypermasculine, anti-Haitian regime, but the references to zapote and Rekha have a subversive purpose as well. Beli's story will fail to be one of the triumphant victory that "kongoblack," "shangoblack," and "kaliblack" suggest. Her story will be a bitter one because she, like Rekha, will attempt to shed her dark past to escape oppression. In his far-reaching cultural allusions, Yuniór not only offers foreshadowing of Beli's complex and ultimately tragic story; he also pushes the reader to consider blackness itself as more complex than it seems. By empowering Beli through a connection to black deities and kingdoms, Yuniór reminds the reader that blackness has not always been subject to a colonial narrative. In fact, some of the most powerful figures in history and mythology are black, as he illustrates. In this sense, Beli's story symbolizes an entire race's story in its historical connection to power but ultimately bitter oppression. Because he enables the reader to see Beli's blackness as imbued with historically complex symbolism, then, Yuniór encourages the reader to adopt a more critical stance toward current historical narratives.

Yunior's invocation of global historical references and his use of footnotes turn readers' critical attention to historical and cultural narratives that we often accept without question. In his use of polyphony, he seems to promise that his own narrative will provide authentic speech for his Dominican subjects, but his narration of Beli's story shows us that he cannot keep this promise. In narrating Beli's story, Yunior exposes the process of constructing his narrative most explicitly because of his own sense of ethical responsibility for both Lola and Beli. Although Yunior acknowledges his intentional narration of Beli's life in Chapter Three, he allows Beli's own voice to appear occasionally. These moments of authentic speech always stem from one of two sources: conversations Lola had with Yunior in which she relayed her mother's story, and a formal interview between Beli and Yunior, possibly on Beli's deathbed with Lola present. When Yunior narrates Beli's first encounter with the Gangster, he relinquishes his narrative control to Lola, writing, "Or as she broke it down to Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto* [this], she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America" (113). From Yunior's references to Beli's own voice, the reader surmises that much of Yunior's information about Beli's life comes from conversations between Beli and Lola during the last days of Beli's life. Yunior has access to these conversations because of his own complicated relationship with Lola, which appears in various sections of the novel. They ultimately break up because, Yunior says, "Couldn't keep my *rabo* [penis] in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world" (311). While Yunior acknowledges that he loves Lola, he seems unable to stay faithful. When Oscar asks Yunior why he cheats on Lola, he answers, "If I knew that, it wouldn't be a problem" (313). He knows

he has failed to uphold his ethical responsibility to Lola, and this failure extends to his appropriation of her voice as well.<sup>12</sup>

While his appropriation of Lola's voice gives him access to Beli's words, Yunior also grants Beli the ability to speak for herself four times in his narration of her story. The first time Beli's own voice appears, Yunior neither distinguishes her voice from his nor explains how he has access to it (119). In the following two appearances, Yunior signals that Beli's voice is separate from his own with italics and parentheses, though he still does not explain how or when Beli spoke these words (127, 130). Finally, near the end of Beli's story, Yunior reveals his source: "I wish I could say different but I've got it right here on tape. La Inca told you you had to leave the country and you laughed. End of story" (160). Here, Yunior steps back from the narrative he is constructing and discloses his research process. He has Beli's story "right here on tape," indicating that, at some point, he sat down with Beli and recorded at least part of her story. He waits to reveal this information to the reader until he has almost finished narrating Beli's story. Once we know Yunior has had access to Beli's authentic speech all along, readers question Yunior's motives for exerting narrative control. By leaving clues for the reader to discover the existence of Beli's narration, Yunior reminds the reader that accepting his narrative means erasing the possibility of Beli's authentic voice because in *Oscar Wao*, Yunior is a narrative dictator who allows only his voice to tell Beli's story. His deliberate choice to commandeer Beli's story instructs us to question his own narrative's validity and the validity of narrative generally.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Yunior allows Lola to narrate two sections of the novel entirely in her own voice. He never tells us exactly how he recorded her voice, but I argue that Yunior allows Lola's authentic speech in his narrative to assuage his own guilty conscience for his betrayal of her in their relationship.

In highlighting his willful erasure of Beli's voice, Yuniór's narration forces the responsibility for Beli's story onto the reader. Throughout his section detailing Beli's near-death experience, he refers to her as "our girl," forging a bond with readers in a mutual ownership of Beli. In narrating her emigration, Yuniór cements this bond and reveals the purpose of his narrative dictatorship. "[R]ansacked to the limit of [her] soul," Beli boards a plane to New York City, and Yuniór narrates the last moments of Beli's story:

Here she is, closer now to the mother we will need her to be if we want Oscar and Lola to be born. She is sixteen and her skin is the darkness before the black, the plum of the day's last light, her breasts like sunsets trapped beneath her skin [ . . . ]. What she doesn't yet know: the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the *factorías*, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her own heart. (164)

Here, Yuniór's narration of Beli's story shifts from a close narration to a long shot, allowing the reader to see Beli as he sees her and finalizing his and the reader's mutual ownership of her. In his narration, Yuniór's language echoes the poetic words of the Gangster, who told Beli she was "*una tormenta en la madrugada*" [a storm at dawn] (127). Where the Gangster saw in Beli's body "a storm at dawn," Yuniór sees "sunsets trapped beneath her skin." This shift from dawn to dusk in describing Beli indicates the finality of her story at this point in the novel. Her relationship with the Gangster is over and she has played her part in Yuniór's larger story about all three generations. Yuniór knows Beli as the mother of his sometimes girlfriend Lola, and he knew the ending of Beli's story before he investigated its beginnings. In this moment, Yuniór knows more



about Beli than she herself knew at the time, enabling him to fill in the “*páginas en blanco*” [blank pages] that Beli could not yet. He describes Beli’s future, filled with “the cold, backbreaking drudgery of the *factorías*, [and] the loneliness of Diaspora.” He betrays his position of narrative control in this transition to Beli’s future and his description of her as “closer now to the mother *we* will need her to be if we want Oscar and Lola to be born.” Beli’s story functions only as part of the larger story Yuniór is telling because the narrative belongs to Yuniór. His final narration of Beli’s story shows that the reader owns the narrative as well; Yuniór claims that “we” need “our girl” Beli to take the last steps of her story onto the plane and become Oscar and Lola’s mother. We, both reader and Yuniór, have gone on a journey together to “unearth” Beli’s story, and both reader and Yuniór are responsible for Beli’s narrative.

In his penultimate section, Yuniór returns to his heteroglossic narration to highlight the reader’s ethical position in constructing his narrative. He tells us at the end of the novel that he has constructed this narrative for Isis, Lola’s daughter, describing his purpose for writing the novel: “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 [the *fukú*]. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream” (330-1). His hopes that Isis will use his narrative to end the *fukú* imply that he hopes *Oscar Wao*’s literal readers will “take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add [their] own insights and [they’ll] put an end to it.” He seems to want readers to take control of the narrative themselves and take action against the various forms of oppression we see in Beli’s story. His reference to Dr. Manhattan in the next section, however, serves as a final reminder that to control a narrative is to claim the authority

speak for the subaltern, an ethical choice Yuniór cannot endorse. After he describes his “dream” that Isis will end the *fukú*, Yuniór describes a panel from Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* in which Adrian Veidt asks Dr. Manhattan to validate his actions, claiming, “It all worked out in the end” (331). Dr. Manhattan responds, “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (331). His words appear to undo the finality of Isis’s metaphorical ending of the curse, reminding the reader of his own responsibility to leave the narrative open. Yuniór cannot narrate a final ending of the curse because he has invited the reader to participate in constructing the narrative.

The ambiguous finality of Yuniór’s story is highlighted in his inclusion of literal blank pages that precede and follow this section. Until this point, Yuniór has used blank pages to signal the end of a chapter or an act, similar to many other novels. Here, however, he frames his vision of Isis with blank pages (328 and 332), literalizing the blank pages of Beli’s story and emphasizing the absence of her speech. These gutters invite the reader to participate in Yuniór’s narration of her story in particular and the novel generally. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud includes two comic book panels separated by a gutter: the first shows a man wielding an ax over another man’s head, and the second shifts to a skyline shot with the word “EEYAA!” in stark black ink. He writes, “I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was *your special crime*, each of you committing it in your own style” (68). In the gutter, the space exists for the reader to take part in the narrative, but this opportunity comes with the burden of complicity. Likewise, Yuniór may have left blank pages in Beli’s story because he was unable to fill in the information, but our

participation in reading the book makes us “an equal partner in crime known as the reader” (McCloud 68). In participating in and interrogating Yunion’s narrative, we have become accomplices in his erasure of Beli’s authentic voice. Yunion’s narration of Beli’s story emphasizes the *páginas en blanco* that he cannot fill in, and our own reading of the story brings closure because we fill in the gaps of silence. With the blank pages that surround the penultimate section, Yunion hands his narrative to the reader the same way he hopes to hand it to Isis in the future, hoping that we will finally end the *fukú*. Still, as his reference to Dr. Manhattan proves, “nothing ever ends.”

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

Within the blank pages, our shared crime of silencing Beli and victims like her will always exist. As McCloud asserts, “To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (69). Together with Yuniór, we have condemned Beli to eternal silence. This shared crime places us in the same Watcher/dictator position as Yuniór. At the end of the novel, the reader understands the political and ethical implications of joining Yuniór as a Watcher. Yuniór has done his duty as Uatu the Watcher, recording information about Beli and her place within the larger historical context of Trujillo’s dictatorship. Uatu the Watcher’s purpose in the comic books is to observe Earth and record his findings with the purpose of sharing them with fellow Watchers. In *Fantastic Four #13*, Uatu’s first appearance, he breaks his oath of non-interference to save the heroes from the Super Apes. As the years go on, Uatu will interfere in the lives of humans often to save them from destroying themselves. Like Uatu, Yuniór interferes in Beli’s life with his narration by subsuming her own authentic voice, but he is always aware that his narration silences Beli’s voice. Just as Uatu failed to keep his vow of non-interference in the affairs of humans, Yuniór fails to give readers the “closed,” “conclusive” narrative he promised in his introduction and instead reveals the failure of narrative itself to speak for the subaltern. Rather than try to tell Beli’s story, then, Yuniór draws attention to his narrative failure and prompts readers, his partners in crime, to question his authenticity and, by extension, the authenticity of all narrative.

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