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Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance

What's ironic is that Trujillo is this horror in this book, but the readers don't even recognize that the person telling the story is Trujillo with a different mask.

Junot Díaz, Interview with Katherine Miranda

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) is a seductive novel that probably didn't need the 2008 Pulitzer Prize to endear it to the academy. The abundant scholarly commentary on the novel has found inspiration in *Oscar Wao's* discursive heterogeneity and drawn attention to its invocation of black urban slang, Spanglish, comic books, and science fiction. The multiple discourses in *Oscar Wao* call to mind Timothy Brennan's description of the novel as a genre that "mimic[s] the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles," and that serves as a space where "previously foreign languages me[e]t each other on the same terrain, forming an unsettled mixture of ideas and styles, themselves representing previously distinct peoples now forced to create the rationale for a common life" (49–50). Whereas Brennan addresses the novel's role in embodying and imagining the nation, incorporating different subcultures into one community, I contend that Díaz uses the novelistic genre to embody the structure and

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my querido tío, Rev. Manuel Machado Prieto, who found his home in the parish of Santa Rosa de Lima in Washington Heights.

linguistic diversity of the Dominican American diaspora, rather than the nation.¹ Employing the appealing guise of polyvocality, *Oscar Wao* charms and entices the reader, especially the academic reader, into becoming complicit with the heteronormative rationale used to police male diasporic identity.

I read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a corrective to the critical reception of Díaz's short-story collection, *Drown* (1996), and to definitions of authentic representation that critics brought to the stories. Not only does *Oscar Wao* explore how these ideas about cultural authenticity are enforced, but also the translation of Yunior from the short stories to the novel emphasizes the Dominican Republic's history of dictatorship as the decisive element shaping belonging. *Oscar Wao* delves into the intersections and conflicts between the Dominican nation and its periphery, as Yunior goes from embodying both resident and immigrant Dominican American men in *Drown* to a Dominican-born Latino in *Oscar Wao* who dictates the life of U.S.-born Oscar de León. So while Díaz's novel aims to represent the linguistic diversity of the Dominican diaspora, it does so by following the nation's logic of consolidation, specifically demarcating the borders of a representative diasporic subject in terms of masculinity and sexuality.

In order to situate Díaz's novel as a foundational fiction for the Dominican American diaspora, I offer several alternate contexts to the dominant reading of *Oscar Wao* as a transgressive text that challenges the oppressive structures of the nation-state. I first explain how the novel is responsive to the values of an academic readership by addressing the example of diasporic discourse. I follow with a discussion of Latin American national fictions and Díaz's earlier writing in *Drown* to show how Díaz historicizes the origins of diasporic identity, positioning Oscar de León as a subject that the Dominican nation cannot assimilate. Despite its title, the true protagonist of *Oscar Wao* is Yunior, and the relationship between Yunior and Oscar calls attention to how narrating a diaspora's history also entails domesticating differ-

1. I follow Díaz's lead in leaving Spanish words untranslated and retaining descriptive phrases for sex in order to evoke the violence Díaz attributes to (hetero)sexuality.

ence. While Oscar is endearingly inauthentic, Yunior's mission to identify him as a representative subject who can embody the Dominican diaspora leads him ultimately to silence Oscar's points of queer Otherness—his virginity and sentimentality.² Yunior's insecurities as narrator reveal that his investment in telling Oscar's story is motivated by an inability to tell the full story about himself. Just as the ending of the novel projects onto Oscar a transformation into full-fledged heterosexuality, it also hints at a suppressed homosocial romance that cannot be rendered as part of a Dominican diasporic history.

Diasporic Contexts and Foundational Romances

By opening with an epigraph from Derek Walcott, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* seeks to address the labeling of the diasporic subject as either "nobody" or "a nation." In working through such a binary, the novel speaks back to celebratory theorizations of diaspora that frame the concepts of diaspora and nation in opposition to one another. This trend within academic discourse defines diaspora as a more inclusive community operating on less oppressive identity politics than those set by the nation-state.³ Carole Boyce Davies refers to how "diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhere-ness" and thereby parallels the "migrations of the Black female subject [who] pursue[s] the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses" (37). These dominant discourses are specifically nationalist, since it is "the unproblematic, sacred homeland definition on which nationalist discourses turn [that] is oppressive" (51). Stuart Hall also constructs diaspora as a counterculture to nationalist logics of exclusion, aligning "[t]he diaspora experience" with "the rec-

2. I find Juana María Rodríguez's definition of queerness useful for fleshing out its function in Díaz's novel: "it is a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity" and "creates an opportunity to call into question the systems of categorization that have served to define sexuality" (24).

3. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur list other examples of scholars who see hybridity as "open[ing] diasporic subjectivity to a liminal, dialogic space wherein identity is negotiated" (5). Some of the critics they associate with this approach to hybridity include James Clifford, Paul Gilroy, and Kobena Mercer.

ognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" that stands in opposition to the nation's "essence or purity" (235). Diaspora is consequently defined as inevitably associated with diversity. By foregrounding heterogeneity as the foundational element of diaspora, Hall argues for a "conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (235). The distancing of the diaspora from the nation sets up a parallel opposition between liberation and oppression, diversity and homogeneity. In order to structure the relationship of the diaspora to the nation in binary terms, the essence of diasporic consciousness becomes defined as Other, as purely marginal. It makes sense, then, that the picture emerging from the criticism of *Oscar Wao* is of a superheroic literary text—Anne Garland Mahler titles her essay on the novel "The Writer as Superhero"—that breaks through oppression to posit an ideally marginal but resistant diasporic subject, whether it be Yunior or Oscar (or Junot Díaz).⁴

The novel challenges the academic formulation of diaspora through Yunior's conflict over Dominican cultural authenticity, as he is torn between identifying either himself or Oscar as model diasporic subjects. Díaz's channeling of Oscar's life through Yunior's narrative lens reveals that even within the diaspora a silencing can occur, because the diaspora is also conditioned by the logic of the nation. Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley offer a similar critique of celebratory definitions of diaspora by acknowledging how "one conception of diaspora renders the other invisible" (28). In effect, Yunior's relationship to Oscar is not one of solidarity but of competing diasporic identities.⁵ In writing a "history from below" (26), Díaz emphasizes

4. As Mahler helpfully points out, "Díaz promotes a writing that does not repress its own inherent violence but rather exposes it in order to disarm tyrannical power" (120). My goal is to show how Yunior as narrator comes to represent this tyrannical power.

5. In her response to Patterson and Kelley, Cheryl Johnson-Odim notes, "Those who share community can also share identity, but I think sometimes people share identity without sharing community" (52). I echo this understanding of conflicted community by arguing that even though Yunior and Oscar are both Dominican American men, the novel pits these characters, U.S.-born versus immigrant, against each other. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, who focuses on the short-story version of *Oscar Wao*, highlights the representation of "intra-Latino rivalry" in the homosocial tension between the Capitán and Oscar as they compete for Ybón's body ("Latino Scapegoat" 27). I expand upon her approach by discussing similar tensions between Oscar and Yunior.

the contradictions that accompany such a diasporic framework, revealing that it cannot escape the influence of the nation-state or, more specifically, the institutional violence and ideology of dictatorship. *Oscar Wao* contests the binary opposition between diaspora and nation, ultimately showing how a common inheritance of exclusion and oppression links these communities together. *Oscar Wao* is a transnational text that blurs the opposition between diaspora and nation by making clear that for U.S.-born Oscar to be a diasporic subject, he must be domesticated according to the code of nationalist belonging, as enforced by the Dominican Republic-born Yunior.

Yunior's narration suggests that the "fukú," or curse of the diaspora, is to reproduce the very trauma of violence that engendered its existence, which for Oscar's family originates in "the Fall" of his grandfather, Abelard (126). Because the formation of the Dominican diaspora was intimately tied to the violence that the Trujillo dictatorship used to forcibly silence opposing voices, *Oscar Wao* offers itself up as a foundational fiction of the Dominican diaspora, with all of the positive and negative connotations that the term suggests. As a foundational fiction, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* engages with Doris Sommer's model of national romances. The historical context that Sommer refers to is primarily that of nineteenth-century texts that process the public struggles for independence and nation-building within the Caribbean and Latin America. As such, these foundational fictions "sought to overcome political and historical fragmentation through love" (26). Sommer's own project in reading such texts is to "locate an erotics of politics, to show how a variety of novel national ideals are ostensibly grounded in 'natural' heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation" (6). Even if marriage is not the happy ending awaiting Oscar's romance, Yunior equates normative Dominican diasporic identity with heterosexuality. Oscar's final transformation from virgin to Dominican man is part of the foundational logic driving the novel, a consolidating impulse that aligns it with the nationalist novels of Sommer's study.⁶ Simi-

6. Paul Gilroy also discusses contemporary "erotic allegories of political desire" in the

larly, it is “[r]omantic passion” that gives *Oscar Wao* “a rhetoric for the hegemonic projects” (6), as seen in the process of authentication that Yunior performs by narrating Oscar’s romance with Ybón. As a result, the diasporic novel functions like a “nationalist romance [which] valorizes virility as a self-evidently male attribute” (23). Díaz shows that the project of domestication, of defining the authentic diasporic subject, requires the violent silencing of Oscar’s queerness. This censorship speaks to the hegemonic function of foundational fictions, what Sommer calls the “pretty lies of national romances” that are generated by and embodied in “strategies to contain the racial, regional, economic, and gender conflicts that threatened the development” of a diasporic and national identity (29). The pretty lie of Oscar’s final initiation and devirginization also requires Yunior as narrator to purge the romantic interest that he himself has in Oscar, abjuring his love for Oscar’s difference.

From Multiplicity to Monologue

Yunior plays a central role in Díaz’s novel because of his dictation of Oscar’s life and his intertextuality as a character from *Drown*. In a 2007 interview in *Slate* magazine, Díaz stated, “[O]ne of the questions that a reader has to answer for themselves is: Why is Yunior telling this particular story?” (“Questions”). I argue that Yunior’s position as sole narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes a link between storytelling and dictatorship. 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. The novel thus echoes Linda Hutcheon’s equation of history and fiction as narratives with similar functions: “Historiography and fiction are seen as sharing the same act of refiguration, of reshaping our experience

black public sphere (67). Using the term “biopolitics,” Gilroy argues that African diasporic cultural production incorporates “celebrations of heterosexual intimacy that suspend and transcend the everyday incoherence and asymmetry of gender, turning them into an ordered narrative of racial being and becoming” (7). I have analyzed Gilroy’s argument elsewhere (Machado Sáez 31).

of time through plot configurations; they are complementary activities" (100). The writing of history and of fiction has the same goal of ordering the past and dictating which key events should be seen as shaping our present. Díaz goes one step further than Hutcheon to construct the relationship of historical agency to literary narration as a rivalry.

In Díaz's view, rather than performing "complementary activities," the writer and dictator compete over who gets to shape the public imagining of a national and diasporic identity. In a substantial footnote, the as-yet-nameless narrator of *Oscar Wao* helpfully points out the similarities between fictional dictation and political dictatorship: "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). In the *Slate* interview, Díaz extends this analysis further and applies it to the desires of a reading audience by arguing that the "real dictatorship is in the book itself." When asked to clarify his statement, Díaz explains:

We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there's an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. If it wasn't for our longing for these things, I doubt the novel or the short story would exist in its current form. I'm not going to say much more on the topic. 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.

In this context, *Oscar Wao* appears to be a corrective to the critical success of *Drown*, a caution given regarding the consequences of consuming any narrative uncritically, especially one that is packaged to give anthropological insight into a "wondrous life." Yunior functions as the embodiment of the "one person" whom Díaz warns of, since he is without question the authoritative voice in *Oscar Wao*.

At first glance, the novel appears to have a polyvocal structure, but Yunior is the individual consciousness filtering the narratives of the other characters, regardless of whether they are in first, second, or third person. He presents Beli's history to us after researching her past: "I'll give you what I've managed to

unearth" (119). Even the first-person voices in the novel turn out to be funneled through Yuniór's ear or eye. He quotes directly from Oscar's diary (without his permission), and one of Lola's narratives is clearly relayed to Yuniór (205–11). Yuniór's role as dictator extends beyond the fictional lives he narrates to include his power to relay or withhold information from the novel's readership. At times this censorship is rationalized in terms of protecting the reader from excessively harsh realities. For example, Yuniór makes a point of emphasizing his insider knowledge about Abelard's imprisonment, that he can narrate "[a] thousand tales to wring the salt from your motherfucking *eyes*" but instead chooses "to spare you the anguish, the torture . . . spare you in fact the events and leave you with only the consequences" (250). Yuniór makes transparent his rationale of making the *ends* more visible and relevant than the *means*. The comforting and yet threatening tone he employs speaks to the position of authority that Yuniór assumes in relation to the reader and, by extension, the power that he has over our sense of what Oscar's life means. Yuniór testifies to his own role in silencing other perspectives as he narrates Oscar's story, foreshadowing how Yuniór's ending for Oscar will violently censor his queerness.

Yuniór's role as dictator is a product of his intertextual migration from *Drown* to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. When the coincidence of relation is discussed, critics basically agree that the Yuniór in *Oscar Wao* is the Yuniór from *Drown*, who immigrated to the U.S. at a young age with his brother Rafa.⁷ The discussions of intertextuality trace one line of inheritance for *Oscar Wao*: same name, must be the same character. In order to understand *why* Yuniór narrates, however, we have to tackle the mystery of who Yuniór is. By briefly outlining and contrasting

7. Reviewers and critics have tended either to see Yuniór as just another character in the novel or cursorily to mention Yuniór's migration from *Drown*. Most of those who discuss Yuniór as a character limit themselves to his "tough-guy narration" (Hannan 66) or emphasize his relationships with other characters, for example, as "Oscar's roommate" (Broun 21). Intertextuality is often referenced as a parenthetical comment describing the narrator as a character "(who seems very much like the Yuniór who appeared in some of Mr. Díaz's short stories)" (Kakutani) or as "(one of Díaz's narrators and a welcome holdover from *Drown*)" (Asim). Discussion of Yuniór's intertextuality is limited to his name, which is taken as evidence that he is the brother of Rafa from *Drown*.

the dynamic of narrative voices in *Drown* and in *Oscar Wao*, I want to emphasize the way in which the Yuniors from *Drown* embody at least two different diasporas, those of immigrant Dominicans versus Dominican Americans born in the U.S. By calling attention to the multiplicity of voices and Yuniors in *Drown*, I wish to make the case that the individual Yunior in *Oscar Wao* signals a significant shift in Díaz's definition of power relations between different diasporic communities. Yunior takes on the identity of an immigrant U.S. Latino in *Oscar Wao*, serving as the sole gatekeeper of cultural authenticity for U.S.-born Oscar and as the driving force shaping the emplotment of Oscar's life and history.

In the final story of *Drown*, "Negocios," the geographic spaces of the Dominican Republic and the United States intersect for the first time in the entire collection and provide the principal challenge to the assumption that a singular Yunior reappears throughout the short stories. "Negocios" opens with a first-person voice that states, "My father, Ramón de las Casas, left Santo Domingo just before my fourth birthday" (163). The "I" voice then disappears and is replaced by third-person narration from the perspective of the father rather than the first-person son. The narrative follows Ramón, who leaves his wife and family in the Dominican Republic in an attempt to make it big in the U.S. The father is the individual who facilitates the intersection of the Dominican Republic and the U.S. and, by extension, the development of multiple diasporic communities of Yuniors. The narrator explains that he was left behind in the Dominican Republic with his mother, Virta (165). Once in the U.S., Ramón marries Nilda, a Dominican immigrant like himself, but one who is already a U.S. citizen (182). The name "Yunior" is the shared inheritance linking these two families together: "His and Nilda's child was born in the spring, a son, also named Ramón" (192). The key word here is "also," which means that the multiplicity of Yuniors is a result of the fact that Ramón de las Casas decided to name multiple sons, by different women, after himself. The narrative explicitly states that "Nilda had continued to put on weight after the birth of the third Ramón" (200), and that this "third Ramón resembled Papi's other sons and on occasion he'd

say, Yuniór, don't do that" (204). It is not clear whether Ramón the father is the first of the Ramóns or if there are indeed three Yuniórs. Even the father is confused by the plethora of offspring: "he was never certain how many times he'd called the third Ramón with the second son Ramón in mind" (204). At the least, we can say with certainty that in "Negocios," there is one Yuniór who is born in the Dominican Republic whose brother is Rafa, and one Yuniór who is born in the U.S. to Nilda. There are then at least two Yuniórs in *Drown*, and they represent two distinct diasporic groups, those who immigrated from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. and those born to Dominican parents in the U.S.⁸

Aside from Yuniór's name, too few intertextual clues are provided in *Oscar Wao* to identify which of *Drown*'s Yuniórs might be narrating. For example, Yuniór mentions at different moments in *Oscar Wao* that he delivers pool tables (184, 195). While delivering pool tables is a major plot event in "Edison, NJ" from *Drown*, the narrator of that story is nameless and the only familial context we are given is that his mother "still has pictures of the girlfriend" and that "[s]he talks to my sister on the side" (136).⁹ In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór mentions some family relations such as his father who supported the U.S. invasion (294) and an uncle Venicio (89), and even footnotes his mother (114) and his "girl Leonie" (132) for corrections on historical information. None of these allusions concretely point back to *Drown*, with the excep-

8. The Yuniór from "Negocios" born in the Dominican Republic might be the same Yuniór as the narrator in "Ysrael," "Fiesta, 1980," and "Aguantando" who has a brother called Rafa. The only other named narrators in *Drown* are Lucero in "Aurora," who makes a short reappearance in "Drown" as the local drug dealer (93), and Ysrael, whose third-person consciousness returns in "No Face." Since the characters of Lucero and Ysrael migrate between stories, it seems plausible that the unnamed narrators of the remaining stories—"Drown," "Boyfriend," "Edison, NJ," and "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie"—may be credited to the U.S.-born Yuniór(s) from "Negocios." However, the stories contain some indications that the narrators might not be either of the "Negocios" Yuniórs; for example, the narrator of "Drown" mentions his mother, who works as a housecleaner (whereas Nilda owns a restaurant), and a father who lives in Florida, but not a brother. In the end, the stories do not give us sufficient evidence to identify the unnamed narrators.

9. For an analysis of the narrator in "Edison, NJ," see chapter 3 in Dalleo and Machado Sáez.

tion of his mother's residence at London Terrace (192), an apartment complex mentioned in *Drown* as finally opening at the time Ramón is "emboldened" to abandon Nilda and the U.S.-born Yunior (205). The most important indicator from *Drown* of either a brother or Rafa is absent in *Oscar Wao*. The reader can be confident of Yunior's birth in the Dominican Republic (*Oscar Wao* 253), but this detail is insufficient evidence by which to confirm that the Yunior in *Oscar Wao* is one of *Drown's* narrators.

Because it is never certain that any of the Yuniors return from *Drown*, the Yunior in *Oscar Wao* symbolizes a change in diasporic power dynamics that is responsive to the interpretive assumptions made by readers of *Drown*. *Drown* makes it easy for readers to confuse the Yuniors, since it equates the experiences of Dominican-born and U.S.-born diasporic communities through the Yuniors' shared abandonment by Ramón the father and the imposed narrative anonymity of the other short-story characters.¹⁰ The novel points to the danger behind readers' misinterpretation of *Drown* by imagining the consequences of having one type of diasporic subject stand in for and hold court over another individual's authenticity.¹¹ Instead of being one of many in *Drown*, Yunior emerges as the sole, subjective arbiter of authenticity in *Oscar Wao* and narrates a singular historical legacy, that of dictatorship. The power relations between diasporas similarly

10. I am indebted to Juan Flores for pointing out that the "most telling and severe divide among the Latino pan-ethnicity [is] the difference between immigrant and 'resident' minority Latinos" (*From Bomba to Hip-Hop* 197). Flores defines difference in terms of "colonial status and class" (197).

11. A common trend in reviews of *Drown* was the affirmation of its presumed anthropological authenticity, enabling the reader to access the realities of downward mobility experienced in the murky depths of New Jersey. The 1997 paperback cover showcases blurbs that privilege the text's perceived realism, including its "searing snapshots" of poverty and how it "captures the bleak peripheral existence of suburban people of color." The marketing of *Drown* figures poverty as the representative marker of Latinidad, with the collection providing presumably unmediated access to "real" Latinos. *Oscar Wao* responds directly to the problem of meeting market demands for authenticity. Moving from multiple Yuniors to a singular Yunior, Díaz shifts from a text that emphasizes a multiplicity of voices and diasporas, which as a whole could be taken as representative Latino subjects, to a novel with a sole narrator that exposes the dangers involved in making one experience representative of all Dominican diasporic identity and history. The novel also draws attention to how Yunior preys upon readers' desires for unmitigated understanding, for access to a true story.

shift, with Yunior as the Dominican-born narrator establishing the terms of U.S.-born Oscar's belonging. The relationship between the resident and immigrant diasporic communities therefore goes from one of egalitarian marginalization in *Drown* to a hierarchical power structure of dictatorship in *Oscar Wao*. Perhaps because so many readers assumed that the Dominican Republic-born Yunior was the only Yunior in the short-story collection, Díaz gives Yunior's double a different name in *Oscar Wao*. Readers can't ignore Oscar's difference and how he represents a diaspora that doesn't fit the established norm. The novel lures readers into thinking that it is an inclusive, progressive project whose aim is to show how even these marginal diasporic histories and subjects have a place within the Dominican community. The conclusion of the novel reveals instead that the process of inclusion entails the ostensibly more authentic Yunior's *de*-Othering of Oscar in order to make him belong.

Unsentimental Education

The title of the novel encourages the reader to think that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* will be about Oscar, and certainly the critical reception has largely focused on Oscar and his family as exemplary models of a diasporic community. The prevailing interpretation of the novel overlooks how Yunior's ability to dictate, first as an invisible presence and then as an embedded reporter, shapes our understanding of Oscar's brief life.¹² As readers become invested in seeing Oscar achieve some measure of happiness for his own sake, we become blind to and even

12. The prevailing interpretation of Díaz's text is that the novel productively recenters marginalized subjectivities by privileging the diaspora over the nation. In terms of its narrative structure, *Oscar Wao* is described as having a "Calibanian voice" (Perez 12) that "allows for an infinite exposure to difference" and "an ethics of love" (Perez 12, 99). The novel's representation of diasporic diversity is seen as challenging nation-state histories. The academic reception figures Díaz as undermining an isolationist and exceptionalist conception of U.S. history by highlighting how it is intertwined with the fate of its Caribbean neighbors. The critical consensus also asserts that *Oscar Wao* counters the Dominican nation-state's influence on the diaspora by "reversing the power cliques" of Latin American and Caribbean dictatorship novels (Flores-Rodríguez 95) and introducing "Yunior [as] a narrative voice that diverges from that of the Trujillan model" (Hanna 504).

complicit with the role Yuniór plays in determining the means by which Oscar will finally feel like he belongs. As dictator of the novel (or co-dictator, if you wish to count Trujillo as a character), Yuniór takes on the task of domesticating the tension of Oscar's *inauthentic* Dominican diasporic identity. The novel defines authentic identity in much the same way that the reception of *Drown* does. *Oscar Wao* is therefore the imaginative outcome of what would happen if the Yuniórs from *Drown* wrote the rules of authenticity, applying them to Dominican diasporic subjects unable to meet that same definition of representative identity, such as Oscar de León. *Drown's* Yuniór collective of decontextualized, disaffected, downwardly mobile men stands in stark contrast to the earnest Oscar who is obsessed with the historicity of his family. Yuniór's individuality makes possible a more direct confrontation with the national codes of masculinity through his relationship with Oscar as object and subject of his narration. The challenge that Yuniór faces in telling Oscar's story is how to render him as belonging to the Dominican diaspora while also attending to his unique individuality. Yuniór ultimately sacrifices Oscar by relying upon a restrictive definition of diasporic identity and silencing Oscar's own critiques of Yuniór's masculinity. In so doing, *Oscar Wao* calls into question the notion of a diasporic foundational fiction that can escape the rules of national belonging and sexuality. In the novel, the seductiveness of dictatorship, whether political or literary, is an inheritance that Díaz's readership and the Dominican diaspora must wrestle with.

Yuniór's dictatorship is predicated upon his relationship with Oscar as his subject. Oscar's inauthenticity as marginalized nerd and "fatboy" are actually incidental (176); what troubles Yuniór's narration is reconciling Oscar's queer attributes—his sentimentality, virginity, and tears. For Yuniór, the shift from witness to participant in the story is structured by a writerly imperative that is responsive to readers' desires. The hypersexualized and unsentimental Yuniór must assimilate his Other, Oscar, into Dominican belonging, such that readers' demands for authenticity are ultimately fulfilled. Unlike *Drown*, which maps multiple diasporas absent their historical context, *Oscar Wao* is a self-ref-

erential text haunted by the historical violence making that authenticity possible. Oscar's progression from tearful margins to unsentimental center parallels Yuniór's transformation from anonymous outside force to a named insider subject. By aligning Oscar's evolution with that of Yuniór, Díaz exposes the conflicted process that situates a diasporic male subject as an agent of history. Through Yuniór, sexuality becomes a barometer of belonging, one that continues to shape the parameters for both national and diasporic communities.

Oscar's sentimentality and sexuality frustrate Yuniór's narrative and become prominent themes within the narrator's descriptions of Oscar. The sentimentality that contributes to Oscar's inauthenticity as a Dominican male is intimately connected to his thwarted heterosexuality. Unable to find a willing partner with whom to engage in sex, Oscar's virginity delegitimizes his masculinity and his identity as a Dominican. The narrative opens by affirming that Oscar "never had much luck with the females," which is "very un-Dominican of him" (11). At first, it seems that his lack of luck in the romance department results from the condition of his body. The narrator emphasizes Oscar's unattractive physique, compounded by a combination of "anti-pony devices" such as his "Puerto Rican afro" and "Section 8 glasses" (20). The narrator's reasoning in alleging the unsightliness of Oscar's hair appears to be that even Oscar's blackness is derived from the wrong source, from Puerto Rico rather than the Dominican Republic. His overweight body is unable to perform what is considered masculine movement. In addition to "thr[owing] a ball like a girl" (20), Oscar finds that "kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads" and told him, "You're not Dominican" (49). Nevertheless, it becomes evident that Oscar's cultural inauthenticity is not derived simply from his physical body: after all, his childhood obesity didn't prevent him from being a "'normal' Dominican boy" (11), meaning "lov[ing] himself the females" and having "girlfriends galore" (12). It is the childhood tears Oscar sheds after Maritza dumps him that initiate the process by which "everything he had in the girl department" would be "burned up that one fucking week" (17). Oscar's childhood fall from

hetero-grace and resulting sexual abstinence is attributed to the sentimentality that continues to define Oscar in adulthood.

Oscar's failure to meet the rules governing sentiment is demonstrated by the number of tears he sheds throughout the novel, "often for his love of some girl or another" (23–24). Oscar normally knows well enough to keep these tears hidden by crying "in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him" (24), understanding that such a public display of emotion is forbidden. In fact, Oscar's visible sentimentality is often judged as excessive and quickly punished. When Beli discovers her seven-year-old son crying "por una muchacha" (14), she promptly grabs Oscar by the ear, throws him to the floor, and instructs him on the more proper response to heterosexual rejection: "Dale un galletazo . . . then see if the little puta respects you" (14). Beli identifies unsentimental violence as the appropriate masculine response to frustrated heterosexual desire, in opposition to Oscar's tears. For the novel's Dominican men, crying feminizes and infantilizes Oscar's body, signifying inappropriate behavior that is equated with homosexuality. On another occasion, Oscar is unable to suppress his emotions after encountering Maritza at school with her new boyfriend Nelson, and his tears garner him the moniker "the mariconcito" from his fellow students (16). Even the bus driver passes judgment, telling Oscar, "Christ, don't be a fucking baby" (16). Oscar also cries while watching the happy endings to SF movies, when the hero is "finally hooked up" (47) with "the love of his life" (307). These cinematic narratives—*Robotech Macross* and *Virus*—model the romance that Oscar seeks, unsuccessfully, in his own life. His tears correlate with his unconsummated sexual longing (186) and the violent fallout of these illusory relationships. Oscar cries in reaction to both self-inflicted violence, like his failed suicide attempt (191), and the external violence that comes as punishment for trespassing upon the territory of others, as in the beating ordered by the Capitán in the Dominican Republic (297, 305). Instead of following the dominant script of active, unsentimental violence, Oscar cries when his heterosexual aspirations are thwarted.

Oscar's virginity is a product of his sentimentality, and together these factors invalidate his claim to Dominican mas-

culine identity. Yuniór's college friends tease Oscar by repeatedly asking him, "You ever eat toto?" (180). Oscar's reply in the negative, that he has never performed cunnilingus on a woman, is taken as a sign that he has failed to meet the ultimate standard of Dominican manhood: "Tú no eres nada de dominicano" (180). Despite what appears to be an insurmountable condition of inauthenticity, the conclusion of the novel sees the recuperation of Oscar as man and Dominican through the body of Ybón, a prostitute in the Dominican Republic. Oscar understands the potential of Ybón: "he was sure, [she] was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (283). After all, a woman whose career is in sex trafficking would be the most realistic point of access for poor, pathetic Oscar. The novel, however, does not allow their relationship to be based on the typical power relations and economy of prostitution. Rather, Oscar falls in love and gets a makeover. Meeting Ybón physically marks Oscar, in part because of the beatings he receives for courting her, but also because he decides to diet and lose "all the weight" (312). In addition to the fatboy becoming thin, the relationship provokes an inner transformation, one that allows Oscar to disregard the authority of his grandmother's "Voice" and continue endangering his life by pursuing Ybón: "Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own" (319). The most dramatic evidence of this psychic shift, of the strength that he has gained, comes when Oscar faces his second beating by the Capitán's goons. The narrator tells us, "This time Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the canefields" (320). His lack of tears is the principal indication that Oscar has finally learned either to rein in or purge that feminine weakness that dominated his body, behavior, and mind. Facing his death, Oscar is unsentimental and lectures his killers on the transformative power of his relationship with Ybón: "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). What is this "thing" that Oscar has accomplished? After describing Oscar's murder, Yuniór discloses that just prior to his death, "Ybón actually *fucked* him. Praise be to Jesus!" (334). With a miracle of divine inter-

vention, Oscar emerges as a devirginized, unsentimental hero who is delivered into authenticity through Ybón's body. Oscar's speech to his murderers reveals that Ybón's love has effected a transformation that cannot be reversed by his murder; even death cannot undo his newfound belonging through sex.

Yunior's Narrating Eye

Yunior is instrumental in convincing the reader to accept this plot resolution, a romantic ending of consummated love. It is Yunior who is responsible for narrating a foundational fiction about Oscar's progression from inauthentic diasporic male to an assimilated, unsentimental un-virgin. Whether as nameless narrator or named character in the story, Yunior is exceptionally responsive to the reader's presence. At the start of the novel, the nameless "I" seems to have a heightened awareness of his audience, predicting our desire for information: "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" (4). In calling himself the Watcher, a character from Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's comic *The Fantastic Four* who acts as Historian to the Universe, the narrator claims to be an objective witness to History, purportedly serving as our expert on the Truth. Díaz reinforces the narrator's guise of objectivity by having him substantiate the narrative with excessively detailed footnotes about historical contexts. Since the novel opens with a promise of fulfilling the readership's expectations, the anonymous narrator depends upon a specific articulation of his identity: first, as distanced enough from the novel's subject to be objective, and second, as knowledgeable enough to be able to provide access to unmitigated and unmediated truth.

The narrator maintains his anonymous, all-knowing persona up to the point that he is identified as Yunior; after revealing himself, the narrator is exposed as an imperfect and subjective source of information, and the footnotes become less frequent.¹³

13. Yunior unveils himself as narrator on page 169 of the 335-page novel, at the half-way point of the text. Prior to this identification, the narrator employs twenty-one footnotes, whereas only eleven appear after Yunior is named.

Once the appearance of objectivity is shattered by this revelation of identity, Yunior's relationship to storytelling also shifts. As the nameless narrator, Yunior played the part of a confident and trusted informant, but he now becomes plagued with doubts about his ability to tell this story. For example, he admits to the impossibility of knowing everything: "Which is to say if you're looking for a full story, I don't have it" (243). This self-consciousness turns defensive as Yunior exposes his concerns about the reader's demands for information and realism, as well as his ability to fulfill those expectations. The crisis of authority comes to a head when "A Note from Your Author" interrupts the story (284). It is evident that Yunior is our "author" (or at least he is narrating the story), and he seems frustrated by the fact that he may not be meeting his audience's standards for plot development: "I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he's writing *Suburban Tropical* now. A puta and she's not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model?" (284). Here, the question of authenticity arises in regard to the prostitute's body as the territory chosen to recuperate Oscar, and whether Ybón can be the foundation for a true story. Yunior assuages these readerly concerns by stating that to choose a younger, more exploited body would mean that he would "be lying," and "this is supposed to be a *true* account of the *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (285). Implicit here is that Ybón's appearance is a writerly *choice*, and that Yunior knows that the romance between her and Oscar requires some stretch of the imagination: "Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?" (285). Yunior's logic for narrating Ybón into existence is not to posit the inauthentic prostitute as authentic, but rather to give Oscar his "due." Yunior is especially invested in demarginalizing Oscar, in curing him of the obstacle that prevents him from claiming belonging as a Dominican male. In turn, Yunior references the novel's audience and its desires for realism, identifying the narrative as the product of a tense negotiation between himself and the reader.¹⁴ Ultimately, Yunior capitulates

14. Sandra Cox analyzes Díaz's use of "forensic," "epideictic," and "testimonial"

to the readership's demands for Truth by continuing to disguise his role in shaping what is purportedly the "real" story. Yunior encourages the reader to accept the romance of sex as a realistic ending for Oscar; in doing so, we are (following the novel's metaphor) swallowing "the blue pill," accessing Truth and leaving the Matrix of illusion behind (285).¹⁵

Perhaps Yunior is so attuned to the reader's desire for a favorable conclusion because of his own investment in the story he tells. The prologue indicates that the unnamed narrator wants to exorcise his ghosts: "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). If the novel's title character is Oscar, it stands to reason that it is Oscar's story that haunts Yunior, a story that the book seeks to both resolve and purge via its contrived romantic ending. Yunior feels compelled to reconcile the marginal and first tries to dictate Oscar's progress by civilizing his body and behavior. In the chapter "Sentimental Education, 1988–1992," the narrator tells us that "[i]t started with me" and a couple of pages later discloses that "me" as Yunior (167). Yunior's explicit entrance as a character coincides with his failed "reeducation" of Oscar. Yunior can no longer hide behind his anonymity at this point in the story, and his role in Oscar's college experience says more about Yunior's pathos than Oscar's. By taking on "Project Oscar" (176), Yunior seeks to "fix Oscar's life" (175). The steps toward fulfilling this task include the miraculous accomplishment of getting the "dude to exercise" and "fucking run," as well as modifying his behavior, "to swear off the walking up to strange girls with his I-love-you craziness" and "stop talking crazy negative" (176). Yunior's dedication to the project doesn't translate into success because Oscar eventually refuses to comply. At first, Yunior believes that his good will has gone unappreciated: "Here I was, going the fuck out of my way to help this fucking idiot out, and

modes in *Oscar Wao* as generating "coalition building" through "affective alliances" with the reading audience (110–11). I want to emphasize that such alliances also open up the possibility of the reader's complicity with Yunior's oppressive dictation.

15. Yunior is actually reversing the equation from *The Matrix* (1999). In the film, Neo chooses the red pill to escape the Matrix; the blue pill reinstates the computer-generated and false reality.

he was pissing it back in my face" (178). Upon further reflection, Yunior recognizes that his anger may come from a different place: "What made me angrier? That Oscar, the fat loser, quit, or that Oscar, the fat loser, defied me?" (181). The constant is Oscar's identity as a "fat loser," and what troubles Yunior is his choice to remain one, to remain inauthentic and reject Yunior's impulse to enlighten him. Oscar's defiance haunts Yunior, explaining why "I got the motherfucker for the rest of my life" (181). Yunior is narrating out of a desire to resolve the tension between himself and Oscar, between Yunior's version of the prototypical Dominican male and his inauthentic Other.¹⁶

When the plan fails to rescue Oscar from himself through exercise and behavioral modification, Yunior channels his desire to fix the fatboy into a different kind of civilizing mission. Yunior turns toward narration as the *zafa*, or cure, for Oscar's *fukú*. After all, it is Yunior who assures Oscar that "it's against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once" (174). It is no mere coincidence that Yunior narrates the miraculous ending of the novel wherein Oscar is finally ushered into sexual intimacy. Yunior is "the Higher Power" who inserts Ybón into the story as a "last-ditch attempt to put [Oscar] back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude." How Yunior explains things, how he chooses the Truth he will tell, is shaped by his own agenda. His involvement in Project Oscar has more to do with his own issues with sexuality, especially as his infidelity and addiction to sex become tied to the political context of the Dominican nation. Through Yunior, the personal becomes political.

Exposed publicly for cheating when one of his flings taped their phone conversations, Yunior is attacked on the bus by his now ex-girlfriend. His social life temporarily ruined, Yunior faces a couple of choices: either forget himself in a series of meaningless relationships, what he terms "Bootie-Rehab," or focus "on something hard and useful like, say, my own shit" (175). Instead, Yunior creates a third alternative. He altruistically decides to save Oscar: "I focused on something easy and

16. Anne Connor argues that Ysrael functions as Yunior's Other in *Drown*.

redemptive. Out of nowhere, and not in the least influenced by my own shitty state—of course not!—I decided that I was going to fix Oscar’s life” (175). The sarcastic tone reveals how Yuniór’s heightened awareness as narrator includes extending a critical eye to himself. In retrospect, Yuniór realizes that the fierce attention he paid to reeducating Oscar arises out of his desire to avoid thinking about his own problems with the ladies: “I really must have been in a dangle over Suriyan—which is why I threw myself something serious into Project Oscar” (176). By his own account, an “ill sucio” (180) and “the biggest player of them all” (186), Yuniór has his own *fukú* to worry about. During Yuniór’s last conversation with Oscar, we as readers find out that one aspect of his sexuality haunts Yuniór—his pathological infidelity:

[Lola] loves you.
I know that.
Why do you cheat on her, then?
If I knew that, it wouldn’t be a problem.
Maybe you should try to find out.

(313)

In Oscar’s final words here, two things are evident. First, Oscar defies the dominant model for male subjectivity through his disapproval of Yuniór’s hypersexuality. Secondly, Oscar acutely critiques Yuniór’s lack of action and responsiveness to his own identity crises. The conversation appears to be the one moment when Oscar’s voice is faintly heard beyond Yuniór’s narrative veil, and in it, Oscar’s insightful clarity belies Yuniór’s depiction of Oscar as a befuddled and naive loser. Yuniór shows himself to be aware of his failings and doing all he can to avoid addressing them. His narrative about Oscar’s brief wondrous life is therefore an extension of Yuniór’s strategy of denial and disavowal. Yuniór uses Oscar as a diversion from the failed narration and processing of his own insecurities.

Cracked Foundations

Yuniór’s counterspell strives to make Oscar’s defiance and critique irrelevant. Not only does Yuniór fulfill the reader’s desire

to see Oscar achieve a measure of belonging at the novel's conclusion, but he also manages to narrate a happy ending for himself. With a lovely, adoring wife and a job at a community college, Yuniór insists that he is "a new man, a new man" (326). Even so, there remains a tension about the neat wrap-up for Oscar and Yuniór and whether Yuniór has succeeded in saving them both. A certain anxiety underlies Yuniór's attachment to hypersexuality as instantiating an imagined community, serving as the foundational element of diasporic identity, and rooting it to the Dominican nation. The final project of saving Oscar also incorporates him into a specific history and culture, into the ancestral lineages of Abelard and Beli, fixing the diaspora within a history of *la Patria*. That national model of belonging is linked to sexuality and serves as the context for Yuniór's own standards. The reinsertion into authenticity through the female body comes with a great deal of historical baggage. The link between nation and sexuality occurs in the first footnote of the novel, which provides a description of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, "[f]or those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (2). The footnote describes how the dictator was known for "fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women," while he is also credited with "the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state" (2-3). The hypersexual description of Trujillo sounds eerily similar to Yuniór's own boasting of his prowess and concurrent resentment that Oscar should have any romance not enabled by Yuniór:

I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action? Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me who had pussy coming out of my ears? But of course I begrudged the motherfucker.

(185)

If Yuniór sees Oscar as imprisoned by excess sentimentality, Yuniór is tortured by his dependence upon sex to authenticate himself. In explaining why he must police Oscar's romantic activities, Yuniór gives a cartoonish, almost parodically misogynistic description of his hypersexuality. Yuniór seems to be argu-

ing that Oscar is no competitor, that he cannot infringe upon Yuniór's very active sex life, so that we readers understand Yuniór to be all the more selfish in his desire to dictate to Oscar. Yuniór reveals his fascist tendencies via his sexual excesses and identifies hypersexuality as the primary source of his authority, enabling him to tamp down or tame the threat that Oscar represents. Perhaps Yuniór's failed reeducation of Oscar aligns him more closely with Porfirio Rubirosa, who not only "seemed incapable of carrying out many murders" for Trujillo but is deemed "the original Dominican Player" for having "fucked all sorts of women" (12). These male agents of history are the postcolonial problem of authoritarian regimes, whose power is derived from the violence and exploitation of female bodies like those of Ybón and Beli. Yuniór not only enacts a narrative dictatorship but becomes the spokesperson for a disturbing model of diasporic masculinity that the novel figures as a by-product of dictatorship.¹⁷

In keeping with his own hyper-heterosexual definition of Dominican identity, Yuniór inserts Oscar into Dominican history by saving him from his sentimental and virginal condition. That narrative is fractured, however, by Yuniór's discomfort with the similarities between his sexuality and that exemplified by Trujillo's regime. Lola's comment on one of her and Yuniór's "last nights as novios" expands upon the novel's representation of the modern nation and its diaspora: "Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (324). Díaz's novel is a foundational fiction for the Dominican diaspora, an attempt to reconcile exile with belonging, diaspora with nation, marginal with mainstream. Despite "[t]he beauty" of sex that Oscar finally experiences (335), the novel's ending cannot reconcile Oscar's inauthenticity with the nation's definition of masculinity. Rather, the narrative emphasizes the structures of feeling that organize the reading experience and

17. E. Antonio de Moya provides a relevant analysis of this Dominican model of sexuality as derived from "a totalitarian image of dominant masculinity" (73) that "produces intricate strategies (power games) for men to oppress other men" (98). The historical context for these power games is that of the "1930–61 dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo," which "was shown as a theatre-state in which hegemonic masculinity (and its inversion) was the star" (98).

how much power the dictating voice and its values hold over our understanding of Truth and History. The institutional violence used to enforce the nation's social codes haunt the diaspora, shaping its formation in the United States. Contrary to the celebratory theorizations I outlined at the beginning of this essay, there is no rebirth or clean slate of history for the diaspora. Yunior, despite his claims to be a new man, follows his assertion that "I don't run around after girls anymore" with the qualification, "[n]ot much, anyway" (326). Before closing the novel with Oscar's final letter about his joyous sexual experience, Yunior tries to end his narrative by reading from Oscar's copy of the graphic novel *Watchmen*. He quotes from the last panel, where Veidt asks for reassurance that his destruction of a major U.S. city was the price worth paying to guarantee world peace: "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end" (331). Dr. Manhattan's reply appears to be the final warning before we as readers enter the matrix of Oscar's satisfied sexuality: "In the end? . . . Nothing ever ends" (331). The dialogue indirectly references Yunior's growing insecurities and explains why the novel structurally has so much difficulty providing the finally final conclusion to its plot. Yunior remains uncertain whether the romance he has imagined for Oscar, the violence he performed in order to authenticate Oscar as a diasporic Dominican, will provide closure and satiate the broader public demand for authenticity. Ultimately, the counterspell that Yunior weaves does not accomplish what it seeks; it is not possible to exorcise the ghost of Oscar.

Love That Dare Not Speak

Oscar's romantic conclusion is ostensibly a fiction, accomplished by Yunior "sew[ing his] balls back on" (168). The final letter transforms Oscar from inauthentic sentimental nerd into a courageous man who accepts death as just punishment for finally getting laid. Oscar willingly accepts his curse, evident in a family history of postcolonial violence, in order to finally fuck, to be initiated into Yunior's community of compulsory heterosexuality. However, there is another layer of desire that is suppressed

even more fully within the narrative of *Oscar Wao*. In the *Slate* interview, Meghan O'Rourke inquires after Díaz's "unconventional plot device" of unveiling the narrator and garners a cryptic warning from Díaz: "Yunior's telling of this story and his unspoken motivations for it are at the heart of the novel and can be easily missed." The goal of Yunior's Project Oscar is to purge the Otherness within himself.¹⁸ After all, the narrator evinces an in-depth understanding of the very same nerdy knowledge about comic books and science fiction that marks Oscar as an outcast. The final "curing" of Oscar through sex also attempts to resolve Yunior's own desire for Oscar de León. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the true romance, the one that cannot be explicitly narrated, is between Yunior and Oscar. Yunior's sexuality is so hyperperformative in its excess that its function can only be to rationalize his own cultural authority as narrator.¹⁹ The specter of homosexuality looms at the margins of Oscar's narrative, and if Yunior seeks to dispel it by declaring Oscar an un-virgin, his motivations stem in part from an anxiety about his own embodiment of heteronormative values.

Yunior's relationship to Oscar's queerness is most evident in the linguistic politics of the novel, with a sexual difference that is made both discernible and invisible by Yunior's narration. For example, the "Oscar Wao" of the title is derived from Yunior's identification of Oscar with homosexuality. After Yunior's unsentimentalizing education project fails and he violently punishes Oscar for his rebellion, Yunior encounters Oscar dressed for Halloween as Dr. Who. Yunior points out the queerness of Oscar's outfit by comparing him to the ultimate literary figure of the dandy: "I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him"

18. Yunior's dictation is therefore motivated by homophobia, which Rhoda E. Reddock identifies "as a policing force . . . monitoring and guiding boys and men's behavior" that arises out of a "male terror of being exposed as something other than heterosexual, as 'not a real man'" (xx).

19. Robin Wood summarizes one of Sigmund Freud's stages of paranoia as "the Don Juan syndrome where homosexuality is denied by means of obsessive pursuit of women" (227). Yunior's "obsessive pursuit" is consistent and explicit in the novel, even humorous in its excesses, yet critical commentary has consistently rendered Yunior's sexuality as marginal to the story.

(180). Yuniór's comment aligns that visible queerness with the English language and its literary lineage. However, Yuniór's "outing" of Oscar also produces the Spanish mistranslation that becomes Oscar's nickname: "Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that" (180). The translation of Oscar Wilde into Oscar Wao serves to closet the queerness that was at first visibly recognizable to Yuniór. What Yuniór finds particularly tragic is that Oscar eventually accepts this queer label of Oscar Wao, a mispronunciation, as part of his identity: "After a couple of weeks, dude started *answering* to it" (180). Since Oscar has already been shown to be capable of resistance, his choice to identify with the translation, to respond to the name Oscar Wao, signifies a quiet acceptance of a queer identity.

The linguistic (in)visibility of Oscar's queerness is evident not just in the U.S. locale of the Rutgers University campus, but also while Oscar is in the Dominican Republic. Oscar's uncle is described as joyous regarding the appearance of Ybón because she serves to contain the threat of homosexuality that Oscar symbolizes within the family: "His tío seemed thrilled that he no longer had a pájaro for a nephew" (286–87). As E. Antonio de Moya notes, the term "pájaro" is "regularly used to designate in a pejorative way men who are homosexual *by choice*" (90; emphasis added). Oscar's uncle reduces homosexuality to a choice rather than a core facet of one's identity, an act rather than a state of being. The "fact" of Oscar's homosexuality is not doubted here; rather, his uncle is celebrating Oscar's transformation or translation into heterosexual belonging: "I can't believe it, he said proudly. The palomo is finally a man" (287). Yuniór reinforces the uncle's definition of homosexuality with Oscar's final letter of heterosexual reunion, following the logic that chosen homosexuality could presumably be unchosen. The linguistic distance between "palomo" and "man" is not accidental. De Moya identifies "palomo" as a term associated with "men who are at the bottom of subordinate heterosexual categories of masculinity" (86). Since the uncle and Oscar are in the Dominican Republic, we can assume that Yuniór's role as narrator involves making certain choices about representing conversations in this

location. Oscar's queerness is left untranslated by Yunior, a queerness that is marked by Spanish alone. Yunior reiterates the uncle's epithet, emphasizing its visible truth as well as the valuable consequence of Oscar's upward mobility into "real" manhood due to Ybón. At the same time, Yunior closets Oscar's sexuality by leaving it untranslated, perhaps indicating that there is no cultural equivalent in English, but also pointing to Yunior's anxieties regarding the linguistic visibility of queerness.²⁰

The novel's conclusion supposedly resolves the ambiguity of Oscar's sexual identity as a virgin since he engages in a heterosexual act, having sex with Ybón. But in light of the fact that this act (like the novel as a whole) is a fiction constructed by Yunior as narrator, the motivation for "resolving" Oscar's queerness is tied to the threat which that identity represents to Yunior's own sexuality. Oscar's *authenticity* comes from his ability to identify with a diaspora of marginal outcasts: "Every day he watched the 'cool' kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself" (264). Oscar aligns himself with the gay students at Don Bosco, last but not least on this list of marginalized communities. The linguistic divide between Spanish and English, between the feminino and the gay, remains a visible tension, and yet this passage serves as the one explicit acknowledgment in the novel that a continuum between the two conceptions of queerness exists through Oscar's affinity with these identities. We also have to recognize, however, that Yunior constructs these multiple identifications. Instead of contesting another of Oscar's identifications as a means of ushering him into mainstream belonging, Yunior zeroes in to counter and "cure" his sentimentality, his femininity—in other words, his

20. Prior critics have commented on the use of Spanish in Díaz as an oppositional or resistant writing technique. These examples from *Oscar Wao* illustrate that untranslated Spanish is not always-already a progressive strategy. The linguistic politics behind Spanish language use and translation in U.S. Latino literature can be ambivalent or contradictory. For analyses of linguistic politics in Díaz's work, see Di Iorio Sandín, *Killing Spanish*; Arrieta; Schwartz; and Diaz, "Fiction."

queerness. That cure necessitates murdering Oscar's identity as a queer subject. Oscar's physical death at the hands of the Capitán's hired killers is simply the logical conclusion to sex with Ybón. Oscar's death is dictated by Yunior's standards of authenticity, silencing other potential narratives for Oscar's becoming a Dominican American man.²¹

By isolating sexuality as the site by which to recuperate Oscar, Yunior also identifies queerness as the most threatening point of difference embodied by Oscar. Just as Yunior shares in common with Oscar a passion for SF (not to mention "Elvish"), Yunior's choice to dispel the queerness of Oscar is also an effort to abject this "*gay-hay-hay*" point of difference within himself (172). Yunior's veneer of hyper-heterosexuality cracks open at times to reveal these queer desires. His concealed desire is the reason that "years and years" have passed and Yunior "still think[s] about" Oscar (324). The most overt articulation of Yunior's suppressed romance comes at the end of the novel, when he fantasizes about the day Lola's daughter will ask him for the whole story, the story that presumably he has just relayed to us as readers. Yunior describes Iris as "the beautiful muchachita" who "[c]ould have been my daughter if I'd been smart, if I'd been _____." (329). This blank regarding the reason behind Yunior's failed paternity connects with Yunior's comments about his current marriage and how "sometimes we even make vague noises about having children" (326). Taken together, these passages potentially refer to biological infertility, but the silence that Yunior is unwilling to bridge also signifies a fundamental insecurity about his ability to represent diasporic identity and meet his own dictatorial criteria of authenticity in terms of heterosexual reproduction.

21. This silencing and death of Oscar as a queer subject makes sense in view of the homophobic pressures within Yunior's narrative. Yunior's policing mirrors that of the state surveillance that Lee Edelman describes as "reveal[ing] a scarcely suppressed *desire* to see, to recognize, and to expose the alterity of homosexuality and homosexual tendencies" (278). The policing of sexuality is also tied to a desire to make the queer subject visible "and bespeaks a narcissistic anxiety about the definition of (sexual) identity that can only be stabilized and protected by a process of elimination or casting out" (278). Yunior's narrating of Oscar's honorable devirginization and death is an attempt to imagine closure to the sexual tension haunting Yunior.

The beauty that Iris embodies and that gives purpose to Yuniór's continued role as narrator is a beauty that reconciles Yuniór's queer desires with those that Dominican masculinity dictates he should have. Iris is the ideal representative subject, and since "she's her family's daughter," she will eventually "stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers" (330). In the fantasy encounter, Yuniór, convinced of his own centrality to the history of the de León and Cabral families, imagines a "knock at my door" (330). Yuniór's certainty comes from his access to all of Oscar's "books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers," which are stored like cadavers in "four refrigerators." Yuniór still wants to shape and control the future narrative of Oscar. Iris not only represents that future, but her body is also marked by Yuniór's queer desires. Yuniór imagines himself evaluating Iris's body: "she has her mother's legs, her uncle's eyes" (330). The "eyes of Oscar" are now finally located in a body that is appropriate for Yuniór's desire (327). This fantasy consequently plots the meeting of Iris's Oscar-eyes with Oscar's writing and words, so that the ghosts can be laid to rest: "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" (331). Yuniór's dream of reunion is located at the margins of his own home, an occasion that can only happen "when it starts getting late" and he "takes[s] her down to my basement" (330-31). Access to the corpus of refrigerator contents is possible only in the sole company of Yuniór, after dark. Once Iris and Yuniór descend to the basement of his happily married home, they can together lay bare the cracks in Yuniór's foundation. The dream's tension of sexual desire is so threatening that the fantasy of encountering Iris's Oscar-eyes is followed by the final entry, in which Yuniór "reveals" Oscar's final letter declaring "the beauty" of heterosexual sex.

The Reader: Closure or Curse

It seems that ultimately the joke is on the reader. "Fukú" is a thinly disguised obscenity directed at the reader of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel opens with the reader being told, "one final note, Toto, before Kansas goes bye-bye" (6). In a

reference to both *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Matrix*, the reader is warned that the narrative that follows will have tenuous connections to reality. With Toto inflected by the sexual connotations of lowercase “toto,” which the novel repeatedly uses as Dominican slang for female genitalia, Yuniór defines the reader as “a pussy.” The novel follows a logic of penetration in relation to its audience, and its conclusion entails a voyage home by “fucking” (with) the reader. The narrative thrust of the novel is grounded in the same heteronormative logic that Yuniór applies to violently expunge Oscar’s Otherness and his own queer desires. The many discourses employed in *Oscar Wao* speak to and draw in a heterogeneous reading audience, and Yuniór’s narrative seeks to seduce these readers into the position of a subjected woman, of a fucked pussy (124), perhaps as stand-ins until the fantasy Iris appears. The heteronormative strategy of seducing the reader does not resolve the sexual crises permeating the novel. Since the reader might be conceived of as male, female, or transgendered, Yuniór’s sexualized relationship to the reader is fraught with the same ambivalence and contradiction as his suppressed romance with Oscar.

However, this toto-logic also highlights the reader’s vulnerabilities as a participant in the project of nation and narration. As Díaz points out in an interview, “Yuniór’s such a scary narrator . . . because he’s so incredibly charming” (“Junot Díaz” 36). If readers accept Yuniór’s narrative without question, without interrogating Yuniór’s narrative authority, without asking how Yuniór’s desires and values shape the moral lessons implied by the ending, then we are left with a curse of our own—the curse of ignorance concerning how our own desires leave us vulnerable to the dictations of others.²² Or perhaps it is the same inheritance that Yuniór struggles with, the curse of being complicit. Here, the text that Yuniór narrates is his attempt to strike

22. Ignacio López-Calvo states that the historical figures of dictatorship (Trujillo, Balaguer) are given nicknames by Díaz to “make sure (as Bertolt Brecht would have done) that readers do not fall into the temptation of identifying with the tyrant” (80). I would add that the “alienation effect” produced by the depiction of political figures tempts the reader into an all-too-comfortable acceptance of Yuniór’s authority as narrator-dictator.

back at the system that marginalizes Oscar, rendering him an inauthentic diasporic subject.²³ But in the final analysis, what Yunior succeeds in doing is merely reinstating the very standards of masculinity and Dominicanness that alienate Oscar and himself. Yunior is drawn to discipline Oscar's sexuality because of his investment in his own self-policing. Oscar's magical recuperation into heterosexuality is an attempt to resolve Yunior's anxieties, a utopian fantasy narrated as the "real" story in order to silence the threat of Oscar's queerness.

Junot Díaz writes a foundational fiction that embodies the contradictory forces shaping historical narratives, the difference being that rather than recording the origins of a nation, the novel recounts the pressures that shape the historiography of a diasporic community. The blurring of narrator and character, of author and subject, produces an ambivalent narrative, but its tension is very different from that of *Drown*. In *Drown*, a multiplicity of competing voices, of named and nameless lives, haunt the collection, while *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a text borne out of the curse on a sole individual: Yunior. The intertextuality of his name, along with its patriarchal lineage, marks Yunior as the diasporic heir to the sins of the Dominican nation. Fractured by Yunior's attempt to reconcile his audience's desire for accessing Truth with his own desire to resolve both his and Oscar's crises of authenticity, the novel is ultimately a testament to the dangerous lure of beautiful endings.

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23. Juan Flores's phrase "the diaspora strikes back" references the diaspora's claim to "full-scale membership in the national community but whose life-experience has had the effect of differentiating them from their Island-based compatriots" (4–5). Yunior articulates a diasporic response to the legacy of nationalism, while Oscar's migration from the U.S. to the Dominican Republic evokes the "unsettling and de-centering effect" that Flores identifies with the "remigrant" experience (5).

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