

Spring 2015

## **“Zafa, My very own counterspell:” The Creation of a Contrahistoria to the Trujillo Dictatorship with Humor in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Kipling, Brooke Alexandra, ““Zafa, My very own counterspell:” The Creation of a Contrahistoria to the Trujillo Dictatorship with Humor in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz” (2015). *Senior Projects Spring 2015*. 151.

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“Zafa, My very own counterspell:”  
The Creation of a *Contrahistoria* to the Trujillo Dictatorship with Humor in  
*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of *Languages and Literature*  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2015

## Acknowledgements

First and foremostly, I would like to give a deep mil gracias to my advisor Melanie Nicholson for her constant support, guidance, passion and ability to help me turn *Oscar Wao* into an actual senior project. But more than advisor, she is a mentor, an inspiration, a jester who has guided me for more than two years, from Chile to Nicaragua and back to Bard, from every distance and through every situation. ¡Un gran abrazo!

Jim Keller, an advisor who appeared out of nowhere and who generously and willingly accepted me and my project and, of course, all the *fukú* that accompanied it.

Nicole Caso, gracias a Dios that I got to know you this year. I thank you for always being next door, ready for a good jest, and open to answers any questions I have. Chequeleque.

I thank mi Mamá, mi fuente de pasión, who has answered every frantic phone call from me at every hour. Ty, the sister but also, the senior project advisor from afar who willingly discusses *Oscar Wao* over beer, over coffee, and over the phone. My dad for answering my questions with more questions: a constant encourager. Kalin, Alex, & Chloe for having a stressed out sister, and dealing with it.

Finally, to Junot Díaz for giving me a novel full of *fukú* and *zafa*, of Oscar and Yunior, and for filling my senior project's páginas en blanco.



Trujillo: “A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery...”

*Oscar Wao, 2.*

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## Introduction

This project has been a series of fortunate missteps. I stumbled into *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz through Diaz's own appearance at Bard College in April 2013. He arrived at Bard through a student who, herself, was in the middle of completing a senior project that involved both *Oscar Wao* and Diaz's earlier novel, *Drown*. I admit that though I had heard of Díaz, I did not know much about him besides the fact that he was a Dominican American fiction writer.

Initially, it was a shock to meet Díaz in the living room of the Finberg House. His stinging language took all of us students aback, we thought we said “yeah man” and “this shit” twice as much as the truly matured adult, especially the one who is a MacArthur Fellow and teaches creative writing at MIT. But Díaz fooled us just as he fools the reader of *Oscar Wao*. Despite his slangy vernacular, we were consumed by everything that accompanied the “yeah man’s,” “this shit’s,” and “homeboy’s.” That evening, Díaz acted as our advisor: he told us that we should not go—straight—to graduate school, but rather that we should experience the world outside the safety of the ivory tower. I would never have believed in that moment that two years later this same jester would be the one of my senior project.

I discovered that there was a jester in this book long before I knew if *Oscar Wao* was a tragedy or a comedy, and if the humor in it was a bigger deal than just a mechanism to make us laugh. Within the process of configuring my senior project, I first realized that there was a distinct comic voice that the book possessed. From meeting the jester himself, Díaz, I knew that

the humor was related to the author's own incongruous language—after all, he was supposed to speak like a Pulitzer Prize-winning intellectual, but did not. Thus as I questioned where the humor came from in *Oscar Wao*, a vision of Díaz standing over the novel with his jester's cap and bells began to recur. He was pushing the same language I heard two years back in the Finberg House onto the serious story of the de León family and the history of the Trujillo dictatorship that encapsulated it. Throughout my first readings of the book I questioned the seriousness of this story, but that question was answered as I started to peel off the layers of humor.

Thus, with Díaz's voice in my head, I began my search for the true jester in *Oscar Wao*. It was not too difficult to understand that Yunior, the narrator, was the jester. His narrative role was pronounced through his frankness and the ridicule he constructed within the image of every character and situation. These were the “homeboy's” and “yeah man's” of Díaz, but this time they were accompanied by a comic book, sci-fi language that the uninformed science fiction reader would not be able to understand—at least without the help of Google. It did not matter if we were in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic while Oscar or Beli de León were being tortured by a Trujillo official, the jester's spitting language was still there. This narrator amazingly spun the Trujillato—the period of Rafael Trujillo's regime—into Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings* and Peaksville from *The Twilight Zone*. I noted that our narrator, Yunior, a barely come-of-age young Dominican immigrant from New Jersey, interrupted the darkest events of the dictatorship with his jestering. I myself, an inexperienced comic book and fantasy reader, began to understand this world of the de León family in terms of Mordor and Peaksville.

It hit me then and there. As soon as I began to replicate the Trujillato in my head as a scene from *The Lord of the Rings*, I realized that this was no coincidence: I was the reader blindly accepting the incongruous images as they were. But Yuniór, the jestering narrator of the de León family story, had configured this world with a pointed purpose. This story is, indeed, a most serious one, and only by understanding the jester and consequentially his humor, can we understand why it is serious. I conclude that, paradoxically, it is essential to have the jester convey the grave nature of this story.

### **The Structure of *Oscar Wao***

Before diving into a textual analysis of *Oscar Wao*, the mere construction of the book and its characters offers much to be examined. The novel's material construction reveals a non-linear composition of history in itself. Instead of presenting us with a story whose contents unfold consecutively; this novel deconstructs a linear and official history of the dictatorship to make way for the de León family's story. Within my paper, I refer to linear history as a history that is recorded in textbooks. A linear history typically represented by textbook sources is one that gives us the impersonal and seemingly objective image of the dictatorship. I define official history as a recorded history that is sponsored by an entity, usually a government—in this case the Dominican government—and which is therefore influenced by it. Both official and linear histories eliminate the probability of having multiple voices represented in them.

A linear and perhaps official history of the dictatorship would map the rise and fall of Trujillo: it would begin with Trujillo as the “messiah” who first stepped into power to lift the Dominican Republic out of its economic crisis, who then became part of an uncontested thirty-



year regime, and who was eventually assassinated. Since Trujillo's assassination, the Dominican Republic and Dominican immigrants in the United States, like Junot Díaz himself, have struggled to recover from the trauma and violence of the dictatorship. This textbook version of history is apparently accurate, but at the same time does not make space for the reader to be critical, because there is little room for interpretation of a history that only references fact-for-fact political events.

This novel's non-linear and unofficial history is arranged in layers. To deconstruct *Oscar Wao*, we need to un-layer its various sections and chapters. The book is divided into three parts, within which there are two to three titled labeled chapters (each with a set of dates) that are accompanied by brief, untitled sections. Part One of the book is comprised of Chapter Two, Chapter Three, and Chapter Four. Part Two of the book contains a brief untitled section followed by Chapter Five and Chapter Six. The final part of the book, Part Three, is made up of an opening untitled section, followed by Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight, and two concluding sections that are left untitled.

Though the novel is divided into three separate parts with eight labeled chapters, the content within each chapter jumps from one time period to another. The first two chapters of the story occupy the years 1974 to 1987. But Chapter Three displaces the reader from understanding this story as one that progresses linearly. The narrator transports us three decades back to the years 1955 to 1962. Chapter Four jolts us forward to the most present time of the book, the years 1988 to 1992. But we do not dwell for long in the present story of the de León family before we retreat to the years 1944 to 1946, a nostalgic time before every other experience in this story takes place. Unexpectedly, these years, the earliest dates in this story, do not appear until the end

of Part Two, when the reader is already more than half way through the novel. The last chapter with dates, Chapter Six, fast forwards to the present time period of 1992 to 1995, a half a century later than the previous chapter's dates. Within this non-linear structure, a story emerges.

Before Part One of the book, the reader is first introduced to a section that is nameless. It functions as the "untitled prologue." The untitled prologue is a section that occupies pages one through seven of *Oscar Wao*. In this part, the reader witness's *fukú*, the generational curse that remains with Dominicans even into their diaspora. This opening presents us with a distinct narrative voice that we soon learn will fill all the book's pages. As a precursor to the events that take place, we discover that *fukú* is a curse that is connected to the Trujillo dictatorship and will affect anyone connected with it. Thus the reader is led into a book of curses and counterspells, with the still unknown narrator working his very own counterspell throughout the pages.

Part One ensues with Chapter One, "GhettoNerd at the End of the World: 1974-1987." This chapter occupies pages eleven to fifty and it is within these pages that we are first introduced to Oscar de León and his older sister, Lola de León. In this chapter, we are presented to the Oscar that we know throughout the rest of the book. This Oscar is overweight, and has a severe interest in comic books and science fiction. Our narrator describes his high school phase at his private all boys, Catholic school: "He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his 'anti pussy devices. . .'" (20). By Chapter One's final pages, Oscar has entered Rutgers University, the same nerd he was in the chapter's first pages.

In this chapter, we are also briefly introduced to Oscar's sister, Lola de León who is described as ". . .one of those tough Jersey dominicanas, a long-distance runner who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you

without a speck of verguena” (24). Lola appears to be the opposite of her hermit, inactive brother. She has short hair and not only runs to get exercise, but she runs because it gives her a sense of liberation. Thus just as writing fantasy stories is Oscar’s passion, running is Lola’s passion.

Chapter Two, “Wildwood: 1982-1985,” presents the readers with what they can assume is a different narrative voice, the voice of the Lola. With the narration coming from Lola, we are introduced to her own character and her mother’s character from a different perspective. Our first detailed description of Lola and Oscar’s mother, Belicia de León is a hostile and tragic one. At this moment in the narrative, Beli discovers she has breast cancer. But this does not provoke any pity from Lola who describes her as an “Old World Dominican mother” (55) who is infamously known in Paterson, New Jersey for her anger. At fourteen years-old, Lola wants a life beyond her home in Paterson. She describes her situation as one in which she had to be “the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying the perfect Dominican slave” (56). The chapter closes in the Dominican Republic with La Inca, Oscar and Lola’s grandmother, telling Lola that her mother was not just “guapa,” she was a “diosa,” a Goddess.

Chapter Three, “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral: 1955-1962,” takes the reader back to the past. We have left Lola’s narration and are back to the main narrative voice of the novel. It is thirty years earlier, and it is 1955 in the Dominican Republic. Belicia de León lives in the city of Baní with her “mother-aunt,” La Inca. They run a bakery that is relatively famous within the city. This time period appears nostalgic and innocent, but our narrator inserts hints of the cruel past that Beli has escaped within this period. This is the first time the reader hears about

the *páginas en blanco*, and this time the blank pages represent the seemingly unknown and silenced past of Belicia's first upbringing.

Beli's childhood with La Inca is pleasant, especially considering that these are the "nostalgic Trujillo days," before the regime completely cracked down upon the Dominican people. This is where the reader first observes the impact of the regime upon the people. Beli already has the feeling of needing to escape but instead of escaping, she is sent to an uppity private school. At this point, Beli is thirteen and begins to receive attention from males. Her innocence is quickly lost when she sleeps with Jack Pujols, the son of a top official of Trujillo. After she is discovered with him at school, she refuses to return to the academy and instead finds a job as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant. As a waitress, Beli comes of age and sleeps with more men. She quickly enters into an affair with the Gangster who is one of Trujillo's confidants. The mysterious Gangster, twice Beli's age, promises her a house, and what seems like an escape from her life.

Her affair with the Gangster soon becomes more serious when Beli realizes she is pregnant. What appears to be blessed news to her, is rather a death wish. Beli is confronted by the Gangster's wife in the park one day. It just so happens that his wife is "*Trujillo's fucking sister!*" (138). Consequentially, she is taken to the cane fields—a place notorious for the disappearances of victims of the regime. In the cane fields, Beli is beaten to practically a pulp, but is luckily saved by a truck that finds her. She lands back into the caring hands of La Inca who arranges her exile to New York. Chapter Three closes with sixteen year-old Beli on a plane to the New York and her "fiercest hope" is that "she will find a man" (164).

Chapter Four, “Sentimental Education: 1988-1992,” is almost three times shorter than Chapter Three. It takes us back to the present of the story. We meet our narrator and his character within the story for the first time. Yuniór, our narrative voice, is a young jock who sleeps with many women. In this chapter, Yuniór is also in and out of a relationship with Lola. But this relationship also involves Oscar, who has no social life at Rutgers University. Thus in an attempt to reconcile his declining relationship with Lola, Yuniór agrees to be Oscar’s roommate their second year at university. In this situation, an almost fraternal relationship between Yuniór and Oscar develops. Yuniór ends up being Oscar’s counselor by giving him both an exercise regimen, and advice on how to talk to women. But Oscar is resistant to change and thus, he quickly reverts back to his hermit lifestyle in his dorm room.

Part Two of the book opens into an untitled section that is six pages in length. In this section, Lola’s voice returns to the pages. We find ourselves back where Lola left her narration: she is still in the Dominican Republic. Her mother comes to the Dominican Republic and announces that Lola has to come home. Lola boards the plane back to New Jersey not wanting to return.

In Chapter Five, “Poor Abelard: 1944-1946,” we find ourselves at the very beginning of this story. We learn about Beli’s parents and even more about the Trujillo dictatorship in these pages. Abelard Luis Cabral, Beli’s father, was a surgeon who received his education in Mexico and came from a prestigious and well-educated Dominican family. Unfortunately, in this era, the Trujillato begins to encroach upon the Dominican people’s personal freedoms and thus Abelard’s intellectual pursuits are impeded. Abelard acts like he is an “enthusiastic Trujillista” (215) and he

even attends Trujillo's banquets, but he makes a point not to bring his wife and daughters out of the fear that Trujillo will rape them.

In this chapter, we are immersed in the suffocating environment of the Trujillato. Yunió's comparisons of the Dominican Republic to Peaksville of *The Twilight Zone* or *The Lord of the Rings* emerge more often. Trujillo himself even becomes a "supervillain" from science fiction. As the island turns more into a science fiction nightmare, Abelard finds himself trapped by the regime. At another Trujillo event he attends without his wife and daughters, but this time it does not go unnoticed. Disobeying Trujillo's sexual wishes, a few weeks later Abelard is arrested by Trujillo's Secret Police, also known as the SIM. Thus Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral's fate is in the hands of the dictatorship. He is tortured and when he is met by his wife, Socorro in jail, she is pregnant with their third and final child: Belicia Cabral.

Chapter Five ends with more fukú: all of the Cabral family dies either directly or indirectly from the dictatorship except for Beli. Beli, an orphan, is sent to be raised by the distant relatives of Socorro. In the next scene, we find La Inca rescuing her from a chicken coop. This moment reveals how Beli got her scar: the distant relatives threw hot oil on her back. In the last pages of Chapter Five, Beli is in La Inca's care and we know what comes next in her life because we witnessed it in Chapter Three.

Chapter Six, "Land of the Lost: 1992 to 1995," is the final chapter of Part Two. In this chapter we are back in the present of Oscar's life. Oscar has graduated from Rutgers and now teaches English and history at his very own high school. But three years after a miserable time teaching, Oscar arrives back in the Dominican Republic to spend the summer reading and writing. Shortly, he meets Ybón Pimentel, the retired, middle-age prostitute who lives two

houses down from La Inca's house. After spending time with Ybón, he becomes lovesick for the very last time. In this moment, Ybón also reveals to Oscar that she has a boyfriend, the capitán. Unfortunately, the capitán is a cop. He is reminiscent of the Gangster and of any Trujillo official who tortured people in the cane fields. Oscar is confronted by the capitán when he is driving around the island with Ybón. The capitán and his sidekicks take Oscar to the very same canefields where Beli was thirty years earlier and just like his mother, Oscar is beaten to a pulp, but survives. The chapter ends back in Paterson where Oscar is a wreck physically and emotionally: he is in love with Ybón and insistent on returning to the island as soon as he recovers.

The final section of the book, Part Three, begins with another untitled chapter of just three pages. In fact, all the chapters within this section are brief. Chapter Seven, "The Final Voyage," is one of the few numbered chapters without dates, and is about only eight pages in length. In this chapter, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic, his last return ever. He is intent on getting Ybón back. Thus Oscar chases her around Santo Domingo until, after a few weeks, Ybón comes to him, and he professes his love for her. The last pages of this chapter seem like a repetition of the chapters before—we are in the cane fields again. This time the scene is as brief as it is fateful. The de León fukúed fate is official: Oscar dies in the cane fields on the island, a late victim of the regime.

Chapter Eight, "The End of the Story," is about five pages in length and its content feels as conclusive as its name. In this chapter, Yuniór's tone is serious and self-reflective. He describes the funeral scenes of Oscar and Beli and the downfall of his relationship with Lola. In this same chapter, Yuniór leads us through ten years of his life after Oscar's death where he is in-

and-out of drugs and alone. After ten years, Yuniór has a wife and teaches English at a community college not far from Paterson. The final pages of the chapter reveal a scene in which Yuniór runs into Lola, her husband, and their daughter, Isis. In this scene, Yuniór remarks that when does run into Lola, all they ever talk about is Oscar.

The next section is untitled, but I pronounce it the “Untitled Epilogue” because its three pages appear to be a commentary on the previous eight chapters of the novel. In this epilogue, Yuniór has a vision of Isis coming to his house and reading Oscar’s books and papers. The last page is a scene from *Watchmen*, one of Oscar’s comic books, that appears to be a greater reflection on the story, but still leaves the reader questioning its importance.

As if we are being tricked, there is another final section of the book, the concluding epilogue to the epilogue. “The Final Letter” occupies only two pages that reveal the nature of Oscar’s final days in the Dominican Republic within a letter that Yuniór receives almost a year after his death. The letter reveals a surprising fact of the brief life of Oscar de León: he and Ybón had sex. The last lines of this section are also the concluding lines of the novel. They are Oscar’s epiphany about making love: “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335).

The reader is presented this layered and scattered history without any reference points. During this project, I myself have desperately searched and re-searched through the novel to find certain events and descriptions of characters. But this is one of the fortunate paradoxes of *Oscar Wao* that I have encountered. The non-linear construction, though difficult to navigate, has familiarized me with its material, unlike a textbook’s construction of history, where the reader’s interaction with the text is limited to the semiconscious absorption of its unquestionable events.



Thus my attempt to follow the de León family history has contributed to my understanding of the history of the Trujillo dictatorship beyond its timeline of political events.

The story represented in *Oscar Wao* is one that gives power to various versions of history that interrupt any form of linear and official histories. Within this history and its misarranged dates, the reader can witness the effect that it has across multiple generations as it jumps from the 1940s to the 1980s. Also in *Oscar Wao*, characters whose stories might be considered inaccurate by a formal documentation of history are included and this time, they are not in the peripheral view. Thus, the reader experiences the stories of Abelard Cabral and Belicia, Oscar and Lola de León at the forefront of the history of the Trujillato. In this story, the personal stories are intertwined with the most uncontested political events of the dictatorship. Ultimately, more power is given to histories of all sort, whether they be of the oppressed or of the oppressor, if they are passed on orally or through carefully documented dates, or if they come from the second, third and fourth generations of Dominicans. The de León family history emerges from all of these aspects—it mysteriously comes to light through a narrator, and through the preserved stories and photographs that are referenced throughout the story. This compilation of a devoted narrator and of pastime relics that constitutes the De León history is not an uncommon way to witness history, especially the victims' side of it. Thus, peripheral and central perspectives emerge through non-linear and unofficial stories, giving way to a *contrahistoria*.

*Contrahistoria*, or “counterfactual history,” is a history that resists another one. In their book, *Studying History*, Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild argue that this history “. . . is the idea of conjecturing on what did not happen, or what might have happened, in order to understand what did happen. The method seeks to explore history and historical incidents by

means of extrapolating a timeline in which certain key historical events did not happen or had an outcome which was different from that which did in fact occur” (125). Díaz constructs a *contrahistoria* by adding multiple perspectives to the history of the Trujillato. But Díaz’s *contrahistoria* goes beyond “extrapolating a timeline” and adding events. Rather, *Oscar Wao* reconfigures history with Yunior’s distinct and humorous narrative voice. In an interview about the novel, Díaz speculates: “Yo intento interrumpir el ritual celebratorio. El poder de Trujillo se perpetúa en las historias que se escriben sobre él. Mi libro trata de levantar una contrahistoria” (Lago). Díaz concludes that *Oscar Wao* is a novel that breaks the “ritual” of giving the center of a narrative to Rafael Trujillo. Instead, this novel is “una contrahistoria” because it interrupts historical events that are centered on Trujillo with its multiple voices, and its unique narrative language.

### **The Structure of My Project**

Thus the chapters that constitute my project seek to explore the emergence of a different story of the Trujillo dictatorship, and this time one with humor. I begin my senior project with the first chapter: a study of how the humor evolves in *Oscar Wao*, and why it is necessary in the story. The first chapter, “From Incongruities to Humor: A Satire of the Trujillo Dictatorship,” is important to our understanding of how the history of the Trujillo Dictatorship is reconstructed with incongruous images. Paul Lewis’ *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*, defines incongruities as an unexpected and illogical conjunction of ideas, images, or events. The humor in *Oscar Wao* develops from these incongruous pairings. Thus in this chapter I examine how humor shapes the reader’s interpretation of the de León family story. I find that

this humor develops from the narrator's distinct language which arrives in the form of his vernaculars. I define vernacular as the language spoken by a certain group of people that usually pertains to their country, or place of origin.

In Chapter Two, I step back to examine how the narrator has configured the type of humor that I study in Chapter One. I argue that Yunior's identity as the jester is not only essential to the development of humor within the story, but it also is essential to this very own story's survival in a society that often only recognizes linear and official histories. Considered from outside the Dominican Republic, collective memory stores the Trujillato as another one of the many brutal regimes that came into power in Latin America throughout the twentieth century. Flattened are the trauma and the victims' stories. I conclude that the specific role of the jester, the role that Yunior assumes in *Oscar Wao*, is not only to reconfigure this history with humor, but also to protect it against a one-sided, central history that can repress the stories of individuals represented in the novel by characters such as Oscar, Beli, and Abelard.

My third and final chapter, "This Tragedy is no Comedy: Does the de León Family History Survive?" addresses the multi-layered ending of *Oscar Wao*. Here I examine the relative absence of humor in Chapter Eight, "The End of the Story," the subsequent untitled chapter which I call the "Untitled Epilogue," and the very last two pages of the story, "The Final Letter." In these consecutive chapters I find that there is an absence of Yunior's humorous voice, and his role as the jester is replaced by a somber realism in which Yunior, a bit tired and very lost, ponders the fate of the story he has been telling. Yunior comes to grip with the realities of his own present life that no longer is shared with the de León family. The era of Oscar, Beli, and Abelard de León—victims of the dictatorship—is officially over. Yunior wonders if their

histories are not officially over, if they will survive and be remembered, or if the *páginas en blanco* or the blank pages, the silenced and lost stories of the victims, will be left so: as blank, neglected history.

Oscar's voice appears in the last pages of the book in his "Final Letter." With his voice closing the novel, the reader is left to admire a humor that may not be apparent on the surface of Oscar's last utterances. I conclude that Oscar's last words could, indeed, be funny, but that this is one of the reader's interpretations. If we wish to truly understand *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, we must seek to understand it beyond its humor and the jester's tricks. Ultimately, it is up to us to determine if these *páginas en blanco* are truly left blank, or not.

## Chapter I

### From Incongruities to Humor: A Satire of the Trujillo Dictatorship

Though most of the characters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* fail to confront the realities of their past and its inherited traumas, Díaz finds a way for his novel to reconfigure these realities. In this project, I explore the ways in which the seemingly determined and irreconcilable history of the Trujillo Dictatorship that the Dominican people endured throughout the first half of the twentieth century is revealed through the humor that arises from Yunior's narrative voice and language. In particular, I argue that this humor evolves through the incongruities that are drawn from Yunior's distinct interjections of science fiction and fantasy images, and his Dominican slang into an otherwise historical account.

In his book *Comic Effects*, Paul Lewis defines humor as a consequence of incongruous juxtapositions: “humorous experiences originate in the perception of an incongruity: a pairing of ideas, images of events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together” (8). Thus we laugh as a reaction to the irrationalities that we experience in life. Lewis finds that this laughter can be understood as “a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then resolving it” (9). As readers, we find the unexpectedness of Yunior's voice incompatible with the history he is recounting and thus, our response is to laugh. With Yunior's voice, the reader becomes distracted from the recorded official events of this history.

Yunior, as the narrator, is able to incite the process of humor—he can use his unpredictable narrative voice to create incongruities. Humor is thus experienced as a mechanism

to revisit reality with unexpected images that alleviate the difficulty of reimagining the darkest of events. By satirizing the Trujillo Dictatorship, Yunior turns traumatic events into ones that provoke the reader's laughter and thus ease the tension of witnessing the gruesome history of the Trujillato. Yunior takes the fear and violence of the dictatorship and does not invalidate them, but rather inserts them into the context of his humorous sci-fi and Dominican vernacular.

Humor has many functions beyond making us laugh. Lewis contends that “. . . survival can be contingent on humor. This is the function of gallows humor: to create distance from our pain, to liberate us at least temporarily from otherwise inescapable torment. . . this is one of the ways humor functions in fictions of development: as an emotional crutch, an assertion of independence from the brutalizing conditions of life” (Lewis 80). In my reading, *Oscar Wao* is a novel that survives and sustains itself through the humor it asserts over the darkest of situations. Stripped of its humor, the book's story might be no different from other stories of trauma, struggle and disenchantment within the Trujillato. The reader—especially the Dominican reader—experiences a “distance from our pain” and a liberation from “inescapable torment” within the humor that interpolates into this story of an undeniably dark history. The humor reconstructs the history of the Trujillato into a dialogue of incongruous images and language with seemingly realistic events.

In *Oscar Wao*, incongruous images primarily emerge from a distortion of history. The past of the Trujillo Dictatorship and the de León Family is as much alive as the present within the book—it switches between the two distinct times as much as it changes between the stories of the different characters. Our history lesson on the Dictatorship in one moment is converted into an episode of the *The Twilight Zone* or a chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Dominican

People's locked up past and its *fukú* curse is relinquished in the most jolting of ways: it is recreated into an incongruity and laughed at. Even Rafael Trujillo, arguably the most infamous Latin American dictator of the twentieth century, is turned into Anthony, a child monster from *The Twilight Zone*, who is the dictator of his small town, Peaksville in Ohio. Through this image of Anthony, Trujillo is distanced from the Dominican people's lives. As he terrorizes them, he does so from another reality. This one is of science fiction. Yuniór remarks:

In some ways living in Santo Domingo during the Trujillato was a lot like being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode that Oscar loved so much, the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world, a town called Peaksville. The white kid is vicious and random and all the people in the "community" live in straight terror of him, denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat in order not to be the person he maims or, more ominously, sends to the corn. (224)

Yuniór's comparison of the Trujillato to the *The Twilight Zone* is unexpected. He is warping a reality full of violence and trauma with science fiction. Trujillo is represented as "the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers." This characterization of Trujillo insults his image of infallible masculinity and charisma. An incongruity emerges with the comparison of such a small, ugly child governing the country. This unexpected reconfiguration of such a horrific dictator makes us laugh.

Also, within his fantastical language, Yuniór relocates the Trujillato to Peaksville, nothing more than a small, rural and most of all, fictitious town in Ohio. The image of Trujillo as a white child reigning over a rural town in Ohio creates an unexpected portrait of the dictatorship. Peaksville is far from being a whole country and is quite literally the opposite topographically and culturally from the Dominican Republic. All of a sudden Trujillo's power does not seem so impressive anymore. His iron grip is over a town full of corn.

But though the image of Peaksville is ridiculous, it is not far from the reality of Santo Domingo itself. While Peaksville is described as "a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world," the Dominican Republic was also isolated from the rest of the world. The dictatorship cracked down on political freedoms so much so that it isolated the Dominican people from not only the outside world, but from each other. The terror of the regime resulted in people "denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat." Trust was nonexistent in an environment of survival against the Dominican Republic's own monster. Thus at first sight, the *The Twilight Zone* image is unexpected and illogical. But the pairing of two seemingly opposite events makes us realize that the situation in the Dominican Republic was no different from that of Peaksville.

In this passage, Yuniór also alludes to the tortures and murders that the regime committed in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic. But this time these episodes are brought to "to the corn" in Peaksville. Yuniór has no limits in his recreation of the Trujillato. Unapologetically, he compares the traumas of the dictatorship to the *The Twilight Zone*. These are the traumas that mark the lives of the de León family, the same family in which he is responsible for telling their story. But it is these incongruous images of the dictatorship and the *The Twilight Zone* that



induce us to laugh. Thus humor becomes the gateway towards the liberation of the de León family story and the reconstruction of the history of the dictatorship. The humor in *Oscar Wao* liberates the de León family story from a history that is only serious and matter-of-fact in its political events. Lewis argues that humor is a tool “to liberate us at least temporarily from otherwise inescapable torment” (80). Though the Trujillo Dictatorship is long over for the de León family and the Dominican Republic as a whole, the fear installed from it still looms over the present. The “inescapable torment” of this history is undeniable: Belicia de León, Oscar and Lola’s mother, is as scarred from the Dictatorship as she was when she lived through it. As if Trujillo's eye has never left, the de León family is still haunted by the *fukú* curse. Silence is preferred to uncovering the traumas of the past.

### **An Incongruous Image: *The Lord of the Rings* in the Dominican Republic**

In *Oscar Wao* the reader is immersed in two worlds. One is the reality of the de León family and their tragic past. The other world is that of fantasy, references to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Twilight Zone* are articulated in Yunior’s narrative voice and give way to unexpected comparisons. Sauron, from the *The Lord of the Rings*, is the trilogy’s main antagonist. He is a powerful and cruel sorcerer who rules over Mordor. Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic, was also powerful and cruel and ruled the island from every side. Even Trujillo is represented as Sauron, a figure who is too powerful and otherworldly to be human. Within these two seemingly unconnected images, Yunior finds a viable comparison between the fantastical character of Sauron and Trujillo:

At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken by 'a great wind' and neatly 'blown away,' with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after death his evil *lingered*. Within hours of El Jefe dancing *bien pegao* with those twenty-seven bullets, his minions ran amok—fulfilling, as it were, his last will and vengeance. A great darkness descended on the Island. . .(156)

Here we encounter Trujillo as a figure “too powerful” in fact, more powerful than the evil villains of fantasy literature and Hollywood. But why is Trujillo “too powerful,” and is he actually? Junot Díaz creates Trujillo to be even more forceful than Sauron, the evil wizard from the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In *The Return of the King* and in most classic fantasy literature and film, by the end of the story the antagonist loses his power and darkness disappears as safety is returned to the people. But Díaz emphasizes that “Even after his death his evil *lingered*,” and that “A great darkness descended on the Island.” Thus, unlike in Hollywood movies and even classic sci-fi and fantasy literature, the evil of the *Trujillato* did not dissipate like a spell cast and then overcome. Rather, we encounter a Trujillo that remains alive even after death—he is both a symbol of all-pervasive authority that looms over the Dominican people and a constant reminder of the atrocities that were committed during his regime. Thus like Belli's scar, the past is permanent. In this reality, it is not some evil conjured up in Hollywood that disappears with the flick of a wand. The *Trujillato* is far from fiction: the dictatorship ends but in *Oscar Wao*, Díaz reminds us that the memories of the past will always be part of the present. Although Díaz continues to compare Trujillo to characters that are fantastical, he admits that his story is

different because with this piece of history, “the evil *lingered*” and thus, there is no happy ending.

Though Díaz inserts these comparisons, the reader may find the allusions to fantasy genres like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Twilight Zone* unnecessary and frivolous because they grate against such an undeniably gruesome reality. The Trujillo dictatorship and its invasion into the life of the de León family is permanent. It is difficult to imagine the application of these sci-fi and fantasy references to such real and more importantly, serious events. But Díaz cannot help but to interrupt the historiography of his story. What seem like trivial comparisons of a fantasy world to the reality of the Trujillato in fact, have their own depth. In his essay, “Comic Book Realism,” Daniel Bautista contends that “Used in this fashion, sf [science fiction] and fantasy serve as more than mere signs of otherness in the novel; they are an integral aspect of Díaz’s particular vision of Dominican and Dominican-American reality and history” (47). The incongruous sci-fi and comic book images of this novel not only serve the purpose of making the reader laugh, but they also highlight the grim reality that the de León family faces living through the dictatorship.

In fact, the comparisons between the images of the reality of the dictatorship and the incongruous, fantasy literature allusions reveal that reality is, in fact, worse than a science fiction or fantasy narrative. Bautista argues, “The ironic distance between many of the fantastic allusions in Díaz’s novel and the actual life of his characters highlights the fact that. . .the grim reality of Dominican history in general was often neither wonderful nor magical” (47). Thus, these unexpected images of the unnatural and fantastic do not seek to undermine the brutal reality of the Trujillo dictatorship, but rather they create a distance between the regime and the

reality of the Dominican people to further emphasize the powerlessness of the people. Yuniór's narrative voice emphasizes Trujillo's insurmountable power. He interjects, "At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken by 'a great wind' and neatly 'blown away,' with no lasting consequences to our heroes;" (156). This reference falls before the depiction of Rafael Trujillo's evil, and recreates a scene where Trujillo is also part of this less-than-human reality. Trujillo is even more powerful than Sauron. If we place Trujillo next to Sauron, there is no comparison—Trujillo's unbounded power and unconquerable permanence make Sauron and his evil in *The Lord of the Rings* appear almost docile and predictable. The reader can anticipate the happy ending of *The Lord of the Rings*, but she is left perplexed by the possibility of a real villain who is invincible, even after death. When compared, Trujillo and his dictatorship crushes Sauron and other villains own reigns by exposing the relative simplicity of their inevitable happy endings. It is Yuniór's reconfiguration of the Trujillo Dictatorship that leaves us discombobulated in its unpredictability. We are reading about a distinct history, while its dictator seems to be above it, elevated into his own fantasy world.

Díaz creates a Trujillo that is closer to a fantasy villain like Sauron than he is to a human dictator. We are reminded that "Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily" and thus, *Oscar Wao* represents a story unlike *The Return of the King* where evil is blown away with the wind and the wounds of the aftermath are less permanent. When we imagine Trujillo to be a figure more powerful than the Hollywood prototype we can understand that his capabilities of evil are beyond those of even the most wicked characters conjured up in fantasy. Unlike characters created within sci-fi and fantasy stories, Trujillo is lasting. His symbol as the indestructible dictator pervades the past, the present, and the future.

In sum, comparisons like these construct Trujillo to be a character who is far from human—he is immortal and indestructible. Our perspectives of the dictatorship are influenced by these references because not only do they provide us with a view of a truly heinous history, but we are able to witness it within the context of Díaz’s own magical language. Evidently, Trujillo was “one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators” (2). To support this allegation, Díaz compares him to villains famous within the vernacular of a young nerd from the 1980s—years beyond the Trujillato. But this comparison transports us into a world of fantasy, and we arrive further away from the practical and “truthful” history of the dictatorship. We are immersed into a gruesome history, but at the same time we are confronted with casual references to lighthearted, canonical legends. The reality of the Trujillato and the fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings* become fused into an ultra-reality of fact and fiction.

### **Ridicule of the “Pig-eyed” Trujillo and his “Culocracy”**

Throughout the course of *Oscar Wao*, Díaz presents us with an unstable and conflicting image of Rafael Trujillo. Working our way through his references to Trujillo and his dictatorship, we find ourselves intertwined within a story that fills its pages with a conflicting set of images of its very own central antagonist. In one moment we are imagining two different Trujillo’s: one is the supernatural, non-human Trujillo and the other is a ludicrous, shamefully mortal Trujillo. This juxtaposition of the different Trujillo’s is provoked by Yunior’s narration of his version of the story. Yunior’s narration not only creates sci-fi allusions to the Trujillato, but it also directly ridicules Trujillo’s personal image contributing to more unexpected images. Ridicule is defined as the action of deriding or insulting someone to produce laughter. Its origin

is the Latin word, *ridiculum*, which means jest. Thus ridicule is not solely the act of mocking someone, but has a greater purpose—it functions to directly incite laughter. Through Yuniór’s narrative voice, we find a ridiculing of Trujillo that, indeed, causes us to laugh. But beyond this laughter, we also note the truth behind the images.

Within the first footnote Díaz finds the opportunity to truly manipulate the image of Trujillo and thus, to ridicule him. Within the preface of the story, the reader is cajoled into observing the humiliated image of Trujillo and his history in Díaz’s proposal of the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2). In this footnote we learn that Trujillo is a historically infamous dictator. Generously, we are provided with a few accurate facts of his regime. For example, Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. But the reader is foolish to believe that the novel actually gives her a true and objective account of the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history.” What follows is the ridicule of Trujillo: “A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR. . .” (2). In this passage, the image of Trujillo that is evoked is the opposite of the supernatural villain who he is compared to other parts of the book. Here Díaz, through Yuniór’s narrative voice, conjures him to be an androgynous buffoon: he wears powder of his face, dresses absurdly, and is extraordinarily unattractive. Among his other more historically-based names, Yuniór also interjects “the Failed Cattle Thief” and “Fuckface” into the description. These two offensive and shameful names appear alongside the historically accurate nickname of “El Jefe” or “The Chief,” the name that Trujillo’s followers incessantly used. The ridicule that emerges from these names is not solely from the obvious negative

connotation that “Fuckface” and “the Failed Cattle Thief” suggest, but also from the fact that these demeaning epithets are paired with historically accurate references.

The footnote continues with more description of Trujillo’s leadership: “Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere” (3). These facts fall between and among the parts of history that are placed in dialogue with the ridicule of the “pig-eyed” Trujillo. Thus not only is this “history lesson” neither objective nor neutral, but it is also one that disguises what is true and false amid the ridicule of Trujillo. An official and linear version of this history would most likely only include these “unquestionable” political events, but here these events are paired with the unexpected and personal interruptions of Yuniór’s narration. The “pig-eyed,” “Fuckface” Trujillo is also responsible for something as atrocious and undeniable as the Haitian genocide. Thus, an incongruity forms from Yuniór’s subjective descriptions of Trujillo that are interpolated between objective facts of the history of the dictatorship.

This footnote of history and its reconfiguration of the dictatorship makes for a scene of ridicule because we encounter Trujillo naked in his humanness. Just above the footnote, in the main narrative, we encounter a Trujillo who “would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond” (3). Throughout the novel, in the main narrative, Trujillo is the supernatural figure who Yuniór describes as “Sauron” or “the eye.” But easily juxtaposing this supernatural portraiture of Trujillo is the “portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato” who “came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror;

treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master” (2). The reader laughs at the incongruity that comes from the suggestion of such a squat, outlandish character terrorizing and mastering an entire country. This incongruity not only makes us laugh, but also succeeds in ridiculing Trujillo. Just as we are confused about whether we should take the image of Trujillo seriously or not,—if we should fear him as the supernatural villain or as the “pig-eyed mulato”—Díaz adds even more to this confusion in the next line. He explains, “He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2). This image portrays Trujillo as a figure without limits to his power, with an unconquerable regime and disposition and most of all, who is non-human. Thus there is even more ridicule that derives from the image of Trujillo as both “Sauron” and the “portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato”. This unexpected image of Trujillo’s image and representation is found just within the first pages of the preface of *Oscar Wao*. From its very first pages, the novel leaves us without a properly conceived image of Trujillo, a contradictory one at best.

At the same time that Yuniór interpolates the saga of Sauron into the development of Trujillo’s character, he also explains the historic event of Trujillo’s assassination. But this time, Trujillo’s assassination is not just the historic event on the timeline of the dictatorship’s linear history, but it is also a reconfigured event of Yuniór’s tongue. Yuniór’s narrative voice interweaves Dominican slang into this scene: “Within hours of El Jefe dancing *bien pegao* with those twenty-seven bullets, his minions ran amok” (156). If the reader was not confused before with Yuniór’s comic book and sci-fi interpolations into the depictions of Trujillo, with this description, he should be by now. The event of Trujillo’s assassination is recreated with ridicule.



At his death, Trujillo is dancing, but not just any dance. We find one of the worst dictator's in the history of Latin America dancing the *bien pegao* or, when translated from Dominican slang, "booty dancing" his way towards his deathbed. Yunió's interjection of *bien pegao* interrupts a crucial and precise moment in the history of the dictatorship. In this case, Yunió reconfigures an assassination scene of Trujillo that is neither honorable nor serious. As Trujillo exits the story, he does so dancing. This is when the reader laughs because she finds that not only is the narrator mocking a death scene with his interjection of *bien pegao*, but he is also mocking the assassination of the apparently immortal dictator, the symbol of fear and death to the Dominican people.

Thus the image of Trujillo booty dancing while death is imminent is funny because it is an incongruity. Death and Trujillo are both morbid subjects, but this *bien pegao* dancing is completely the opposite: it is a lighthearted subject that also represents a youthful, sensual culture and activity. An incongruity is also found within the language. *Bien pegao* is Dominican slang. The insertion of Dominican Spanish into this discourse of history is certainly an interruption into the history itself. The reader confronts *bien pegao* within the morbid event of Trujillo's assassination, and therefore can only be jolted by the unexpectedness of such crude language. Thus, what comes next is laughter.

But even though the immediate image of Trujillo booty dancing at the scene of his death is ridiculous, the purpose of this image is more than to provide the reader with laughter. Yunió presents us with a figure who he claims was both "one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators," and who was "one of the wealthiest men on the planet" (2). But without hesitation and reservation, he places Trujillo into a scene of the *Danse Macabre* with us watching. This time the

*Danse Macabre* is far from the ancient motif of the “dance of death” that we see depicted in literature and paintings dating back to the fifteenth century. Rather, this French idiom is simply replaced with a different terminology: Yuniór’s vernacular of *bien pegao*.

But even the slang, *bien pegao*, maintains the symbolism of the *Danse Macabre*. Yes, Trujillo is booty dancing towards his death, but this booty dance is the one of the Dominican Republic, it is a dance that comes from the people. Just like the *Danse Macabre*, it symbolizes that at death, Trujillo is no longer Trujillo. Just like everyone else in the Dominican Republic, he dies dancing the *bien pegao*. In one scene, we witness three transformations of Trujillo: from dictator to Sauron, to a villain with even more supernatural powers, and lastly, to a twitching figure, *a person*, dancing at his death. Within this dance of death we witness Trujillo as truly human. Trujillo dies like other Dominicans, including the ones his supernatural-self has killed, watched over, interrogated, and tortured in his country. Yuniór’s testimony humanizes him.

The ridicule of Trujillo in *Oscar Wao* is also found within the theme of Trujillo and his sexual appetite. We observe a shameful image of Trujillo as a vulture, scrounging the Dominican Republic for young women beginning with the first footnote of the story: “Famous. . .for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands of women” (2). Already the reader is struck by the ludicrousness of Trujillo “fucking. . .thousands of women.” Not only does this suggestive image seem nearly impossible, but it also delegitimizes the serious image of the Trujillo regime. Yes, “fucking thousands upon thousands of women” is unbelievable. It is so unbelievable that it is above human, it is supernatural. In fact, the idea that Trujillo was supernatural pervaded all parts of the Dominican Republic. In the novel, we are provided with a comment from the Dominican newspaper, *La Nación*: “Men are not

indispensable. But Trujillo is irreplaceable. For Trujillo is not a man. He is. . . a cosmic force. . . Those who try to compare him to his ordinary contemporaries are mistaken. He belongs to. . . the category of those born to a special destiny” (204). Though the idea of Trujillo as a “cosmic force” is repeated throughout the book through Yuniór’s fantastical allusions, it derives from a true account. Yuniór’s conjectures about Trujillo being supernatural date back to the reality of the Trujillato as witnessed in this quote from *La Nación*. But Yuniór contorts Trujillo’s image and the common belief that Trujillo was an inhuman, “cosmic force” by venerating that which is offensive: Trujillo’s sex life and his insatiability. Yuniór applies the belief of “Trujillo is not a man” to the fact that he could “fuck thousands,” a grotesque action that is beyond the capability of any human. This is especially impossible in consideration of the fact that Trujillo was approaching his fifties and sixties in the latter half of his regime. Within the context of his novel, Yuniór reveals where the Trujillato actually used its energy:

Hiding your doe-eyed, large-breasted daughter from Trujillo, however, was anything but easy. (Like keeping the ring from Sauron.) If you think the average Dominican guy’s bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse. Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass; if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world’s first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was). (217)

Though, for a fact, it is known that Trujillo raped many young women throughout the Dominican Republic, Yuniór plays upon this event even more. By emphasizing this part of Trujillo and his

regime, he veers from a conventional, official, and linear history of the dictatorship. Yuniors converts this perverse power play of raping young women into something even more perverse and absurd. In relation to Trujillo, he yet again references Sauron, but in this context and with his play on the reference, it now holds a negative connotation. In the allusion, “Like keeping the ring from Sauron,” Yuniors configures an image of a Trujillo who is not only obsessed with obtaining “his next piece of ass,” but also is neurotic about raping his next victim. This Trujillo is manic. Yuniors creates an absurd atmosphere where Trujillo seems to have lost all reason in his hunt for “ass.” It makes the reader question: how can this dictator possibly dictate?

Trujillo appears so irrationally obsessed with finding his next victim, that Yuniors entertains this idea even more by referring to the Trujillato as a “the regime would have been the world’s first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was).” The word “culo” is significant of “ass” in the Spanish colloquial. Here the reader encounters the ultimate ridicule of the Trujillo dictatorship: Trujillo’s character is perceived as manic, and his regime’s ambitions are focused on getting ass. Even though Trujillo is represented as Sauron and as a supernatural villain, his character also seems to have a disorder; he has a barbaric obsession with sex. Yuniors is able to turn the focus of Trujillo as a figure who is above human status into a figure who is bestial in his fetish for sex. This ridicule breaks down Trujillo’s image of invincibility because it create an incongruous pairing of his invincibility with that which is most absurd and shameful, his sexual appetite. Thus, these visualizations of Trujillo conjure offensive images of the Trujillato. The images of Trujillo dancing the *bien pegao* at the scene of his death and of Trujillo “fucking thousands upon thousands of women” are ones in which we cannot take seriously. In fact, there is not much more insulting than humoring and reimagining both the death of Trujillo, and

Trujillo having intercourse in his bed. For a fact, Trujillo was a figure in which one would be sent to jail just for uttering his name wrong.

But the fact that Yuniór toys with the image of Trujillo without reservations breaks the idea of Trujillo as Sauron, or the inescapable “evil eye” of the Dominican Republic. Yuniór gives himself the ability to ridicule Trujillo, though he admits that “even after his death, his evil lingered.” Thus, he proves that perhaps this image of Trujillo as Sauron, as the most “powerful” and “toxic” villain that ever existed is one that can be shattered with only the mechanism of ridicule. Through Yuniór’s narration, the reader is able to remove himself from “the eye” of the dictatorship. The reader almost becomes the eye himself because he is now the one peering over the dancing Trujillo, not the opposite. Most of all, the reader is left to watch over a Trujillo who is dancing the *bien pegao* and foraging the Dominican Republic for the “next piece of ass.”

Yuniór, through his narration, proves that even the worst villains of history can be laughed at. Trujillo was certainly one of the worst Latin American dictators that ever lived, but with time and within the course of history we have the ability to ridicule him. At the same time that we believe in a dictator so evil he cannot possibly be human, Yuniór has also found the ability to humanize him for us. Yuniór asserts that “many people actually believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers! . . . he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away, that he was protected by the most evil fukú on the Island” (226).

Trujillo seems incapable of human fallacy and human impulses. But besides these supernatural capabilities, Yuniór reminds us that Trujillo is, after all, human in the most human of ways: he dies a death that mirrors the death of every other human, or in this case, Dominican dancing the *bien pegao* towards his grave. Thus Trujillo is ridiculed because he has been unmasked of his

supernatural character. Ridiculing the dictator can be dangerous, but in this novel written almost half a century after the dictatorship, the pages cannot be torn from the book and thrown to the flames. It proves that Trujillo's evil has not lingered, and perhaps what has lingered more, are the scars that the people have inherited from his evil. Yunior's tampering with history gives the reader the ability to decide how seriously to interpret this history given the context of his book. There is always the fact-for-fact account of the past, but Yunior prefers to reconfigure it with absurd references.

## **Chapter II**

### **The Narrator as Jester: Yunior Protects the de León Family History**

The incongruous images we witness in Chapter One come from Yunior's narrative voice. But these incongruities, and the humor that accompanies them, are far from being unintentional. The humor that is derived from Yunior's voice comes from a need to articulate a history that is separate from the common linear and official history of the dictatorship. Thus in *Oscar Wao*, we find a jester who emerges from the voice of the narrator with the intention to conceive the history of the de León family in a purposeful way.

Who and what is the jester? Jester is the character we might associate with the clown of the medieval era, the fool who makes us laugh. But the jester is no fool, and even though he seems to be a buffoon derived from the era of knights and serfdom, he is an elusive figure that continues to pervade society in different forms. Thus, Yunior, the New Jersey youth bursting at the tongue with crude wit, is our entertainer: our jester juggling the stories of the past. In this chapter, I argue that Yunior assumes the role of jester and in doing so, he is able to protect the de León family story against its disappearance from a collective memory that is usually dominated by the linear and official history of the dictatorship.

As the narrator of *Oscar Wao*, Yunior's voice not only shapes the characters and their relationships in the story, but his voice also shapes the story itself. This voice defines the narrator distinctly from the characters. With his voice and the diction that emerges from it, the narrator is essentially the judge and interpreter of experiences and situations within a story. As the narrator,

Yunior depicts the reality of the de León family and its history for us. Though Yunior is in the plot, a character who falls into Oscar's life and Lola's arms, he is primarily the storyteller. He attempts to weave his way through an accursed story.

Thus we turn to the question of why Yunior is the jester. The jester is elusive and flexible, and he has "humor at his disposal" (Otto 3). These characteristics give him the ability to not only provide entertainment, but to also address serious situations. The jester does not perform to solely sustain himself, but rather he ". . .frequently uses his talents to help others, cause merriment, give advice, or defuse a perilous situation" (Otto 41). He is not just a merrymaker, he also has the skills to confront problems in society and resolve them. I argue that within *Oscar Wao*, the jester is an essential extension to Yunior's narrative role. He is the figure that is best able to confront the grim past of the Trujillo dictatorship. In his essay, "Textual Territory and Narrative Power," Richard Patterson argues that Yunior's narrative voice is an instrument that gives him power over the telling of the de León story. He contends that "Although this distinctive voice makes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the most linguistically rich Caribbean or American novel to appear in quite some time, Díaz signals in numerous ways that the voice is above all an instrument of Yunior's power" (Patterson 7). Thus his voice is not only a mechanism to distinguish the de León family story from others, but it is also a tool. Yunior derives his voice from his power as the narrator; a power which I argue derives not solely from the definition of his narrative role, but also from his role as the jester.

As the jester, Yunior's vernacular interrupts the past; his storytelling configures and reconfigures it. This vernacular conceives a story that synthesizes a realistic world of violence and trauma with a paradoxical world of a sci-fi and comic book genre. Traversing these two



realms within his role as narrator, Yuniór becomes the jester. The jester's ability to traverse two different realms comes from his distance from the story. The jester and the trickster "stand outside society and thereby give people who live firmly within its confines a glimpse of what lies beyond, showing life from a different vantage point" (Otto 38). As the jester, Yuniór is outside Dominican society in the story as much as he is outside the story itself. At this distance, Yuniór has the perspective to not only see reality for what it truly is, but to also narrate a story that is outside of society's accepted perspective of history. He provides the reader with a history of the dictatorship that is "from a different vantage point" (Otto 38). Yuniór's distance from the story gives him the duty to watch over it and thus guarantee that it persists as the true reality of the de León family. He becomes the protector of the story and its survival.

With this duty Yuniór bestows the name "Watcher," the comic book character from *Fantastic Four*, upon himself. In his literary essay, "Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction," T.S. Miller defines Yuniór's role as the Watcher as one that has a distinct part in the trajectory of this story: "Yuniór as a character interferes very little in the trajectory of the narrative. . .yet perhaps he, like the maverick Uatu, violates the directive by exercising that inevitable narratorial "interference" over the story he tells. In a sense, Yuniór plays up the way in which the Watcher observes, again striving to suppress the fact that *this* Watcher also tells—tells and alters events in their telling" (102). Yuniór interferes with the story because he "alters events in their telling" through the humor and tricks that come from his role as the jester. He is an active Watcher who, through his observances of the de León family, changes the course of their story with his narrative voice. Thus, even throughout the novel we are reminded that "your humble Watcher" is watching over the story at a distance, the Watcher still interferes with the story

through his voice. As jester and therefore Watcher, Yuniór and the story maintain their capacity to survive: “There is in the jester a quality of resilience that means that even when he is beaten it does not seem to injure him. . .the clown always seems to survive” (Otto 135). Being the jester, Yuniór has a resilience that attests to the resilience of the story and the humor that is maintained until its very last chapters. Without his role as the resilient jester, Yuniór would not be able to articulate the dark stories of *Oscar Wao* with such frankness.

His resilience as jester also gives Yuniór the ability to resist the *fukú* of the de León family story. Even before Yuniór probes into the story of the de León family, he introduces the reader to *fukú*: “It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond” (2). Yuniór defines “*Fukú*” as “. . .a curse or a doom of some kind” that travels through generations, “down to the seventh generation and beyond” (1). *Fukú* is the trauma and terror that remains from the dictatorship. As jester, Yuniór attempts to drive away the *fukú* by unsilencing the histories of the victims. Yuniór reveals that the only way to stop the *fukú* is with “A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers). *Zafa*” (7). Yuniór confesses, “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). *Zafa* is Yuniór’s way of releasing the stories of trauma buried within the past. “*Zafar*,” according to the Real Academia Española, means “Desembarazar, libertar, quitar los estorbos de algo.” When translated, this means “to rid of, to liberate, to remove the clogs from.” Yuniór “removes the clogs” from voices that have been silenced and covered up by the official history of the dictatorship and consequently, left out of its linear history where there is usually no space for

them. Thus I argue that *zafa* is the counterspell of the jester, a counterspell delivered in the most forthright and un-ignorable of ways: with humor.

### **Language as Tool for the Jester**

As the de León family story retreats into the past, the jester's distinct humor remains. Because humor is at the disposal of the jester, Yuniór is able to use language as a tool to ridicule the gruesome past while reconfiguring it at the same time. His humor moves freely through the story because as jester he has few constraints. The jester “. . .has become a symbol of physical and verbal dexterity and of freedom from convention” (Otto XVII). Yuniór's verbal dexterity gives him the ability to use language as a vehicle to humor the darkest of situations. As the jester, he also possesses freedom from convention which is crucial to his narrative role. He has the ability to tell the de León family story with unexpected and unconventional images that come solely from his own vernaculars.

These diverse vernaculars produce humor. Yuniór has come from a Dominican neighborhood in New Jersey and thus he carries with him a Jersey slang that evades all times and places within the novel. He also speaks a Dominican slang—his Spanish turns into a mash of primarily dirty words from Dominican culture that pervade the darkest of scenes. As a Rutgers University student, Yuniór also speaks a language of intellect and academia. But it is the vernacular that Yuniór inherits from Oscar that intrudes most onto the sequences of the past. Lining his Jersey slang, Yuniór coats his voice with the anime, sci-fi, and comic book images that we associate with Oscar.

Thus Yunior possesses a verbal dexterity that gives him the capacity to navigate and transcend the different hierarchies of society that are enforced with language. The jester “. . . is very much a universal character, more or less interchangeable regardless of the time or culture in which he happens to cavort. . .” (Otto XVI). Like the jester, Yunior’s wit is interchangeable within time and culture—he walks through different social settings, through different times, and is able to do so while cavorting. When Yunior narrates, his modern Dominican slang and 1980s sci-fi knowledge interferes with a scene of the upper-class family of Abelard Cabral in the Dominican Republic of the 1930s. This same voice is carried to and from his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey and to Rutgers University, where he mingles with the jocks while Oscar dwells in his comic books and in his apathy.

Because he is the jester, Yunior is able to humor a brutal past. He interweaves his vernaculars into the torture, rape, and murders that occur throughout the Trujillo dictatorship. The reality of the “Era de Trujillo” is described with a humor that emerges from a bizarre mash-up of brutal scenes from the past with a fantasy world of the present. Chapter Five of *Oscar Wao* occurs from 1944 to 1946, at the height of Trujillo’s stronghold in the Dominican Republic. Yunior narrates the scene of a Trujillo-run country:

Between 1930 (when the Failed Cattle Thief seized power) and 1961 (the year he got blazed) Santo Domingo was the Caribbean’s very own Peaksville with Trujillo playing the part of Anthony and the rest of us reprising the role of the Man Who Got Turned into Jack-in-the-Box. You might roll your eyes at the comparison, but, friends: it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted

over the Dominican people and the shadow of fear he cast throughout the region. Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor. (Diaz 224)

As jester, Yuni6r gets away with comparing Trujillo to *The Twilight Zone*'s freaky, small-town monster-boy, Anthony. In this scene, though Trujillo's power is undeniable, so much so, that it is "hard to exaggerate," the jester toys and ridicules the king by making his image an incongruity within his sci-fi language. Trujillo, the feared dictator, is still the dictator in this scene, but this time Yuni6r has played with his character: he sits atop his throne as a monster-boy whose control is over the small town of Peaksville. At the same time within this story that Yuni6r refers to Trujillo as one of the most infamous dictators in Latin America, he also labels him "Anthony" and "homeboy."

Here the figure of the jester within Yuni6r emerges in his ability to unveil the gruesome past of the Dominican Republic while humoring it. He emphasizes the atrocities of the Trujillo Dictatorship through humor, just as the jester does when performing for the court. Yuni6r is not just entertaining the past with humorous dialogue: "Of at least equal importance with his entertainer's cap was the jester's function as adviser and critic. This is what distinguishes him from a pure entertainer. . .who would play the fool simply to amuse people" (Otto 245). In revealing the nature of Trujillo's regime through his vernacular, Yuni6r also criticizes it. Yuni6r's criticism of the regime is observed through the very same incongruous images that make us laugh. The comparison of the Dominican Republic to Peaksville of *The Twilight Zone* and to Mordor of *The Lord of the Rings* is not simply ridicule, but rather it reveals the absurdity of the regime and the surreal environment of fear it induced upon the Dominican people. Yuni6r

alludes to Santo Domingo as Trujillo's "very own private Mordor," denying Trujillo his verified hold of the power and turning it into an episode from one of Oscar's *The Lord of the Rings* books. To even imagine the Dominican people living or more so, surviving in Mordor is to imagine them without any personal freedoms, and with fear day after day of torture, violence and death. But this image is exactly what occurred under the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Thus, Yuniór's ridicule of Trujillo has a higher function: it critiques the regime and most of all, it finds images that the reader can use to help herself grasp the alarmingly unjust world that the Trujillato created.

History is converted into the jester's very own playground. Yuniór has uprooted Trujillo from his throne with his allusions to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Twilight Zone*. By calling Trujillo "homeboy," Yuniór places himself next to the king as if they are mutual friends. With Yuniór's unpredictable and unexplained interjections, it appears as if Trujillo speaks the same slang that comes from Yuniór's modern tongue. Meanwhile, Yuniór carries on illustrating Trujillo's impressive grip of power over the Dominican Republic. The back-and-forth game between acknowledging and legitimizing Trujillo's power, and at the same time, stripping him of it by belittling his character, is the game that the jester plays best. The jester's importance is derived from this game of ridicule.

As jester, while reminding us of the rape of young Dominican women by Trujillo, Yuniór creates a tension between this event and his language. He finds a way to make the situation informal and ridiculous. Dirty, Dominican slang and an accusatory "you" are inserted into the description of Trujillo's crusade to rape women. Yuniór brutishly entertains this image, capturing it outside of the regulated diction in a formal history lesson on the dictatorship:

Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country. Believed that all the toto in the DR was, literally, his. It's a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* (Diaz 216-217)

In this illustration of the dictatorship Yunior uses his skill of verbal dexterity to construct a past that is absurd and comical. He inserts Dominican slang alongside an American jargon to create a ludicrous picture of the dictatorship through a hyper-sexualization of Trujillo. A sports vernacular is placed alongside a Dominican one with "Number-One" introducing "Bellaco," a Dominican slang word for horny. Yunior continues with another piece of slang, "toto," which is a vulgar way of saying vagina in the Dominican Republic. Again, we encounter an American sports term slammed against more Dominican slang: "mamando his ripio like an old pro." The dirty Dominican slang, "mamando his ripio," is no less dirty when translated in English to "sucking his dick." Yunior merges these vernaculars to conceive an image of the dictatorship that appears less serious because it is animated by his casual words. He creates an unexpected mixture of languages that do not relate to the time or place he is describing. Thus the reader is inclined to laugh at the absurdity of the mash-up of displaced vernaculars that are positioned over the serious context of Trujillo's violation of women.

Yunior uses images like these as a jumping off point for the reader's interpretation of the Trujillo dictatorship. Yunior admits, "Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country" (216). Trujillo was one of many dictators in Latin America during the twentieth century, but in this scene Yunior intends to distinguish his character by playing on the fact that he was both a "Dominican Dictator," and the "Number-One Bellaco in the Country." Yunior sets Trujillo apart from other dictators by emphasizing the name "Dominican Dictator" with capital letters. By presenting Trujillo as a "Dominican Dictator," Yunior establishes that Trujillo is a dictator to be remembered apart from others in history. Bestowing him the label of the "Number-One Bellaco in the Country," Yunior creates an even more disgracefully memorable image of Trujillo. Thus Yunior assures us that Trujillo is remembered, and that he is remembered as a brutal, disgusting tyrant unique to Dominican history.

Thus Yunior's performance with his different languages gives way to an unexpected image of the Trujillo Dictatorship that is not concurrent with linear or official history. Through the image of the "cute daughter. . .mamando his ripio like an old pro" Yunior emphasizes the true powerlessness of the people under the Trujillato. Paradoxically, by focusing on Trujillo's ridiculous character, Yunior is able to conjure an image of a Dominican parent's profound helplessness, and the appalling fact that "*there would be nothing you could do about it!*" (217). Thus Yunior's slang-tainted images speak to the side of the history of the dictatorship that resonates with those who were victims of Trujillo's actions. The jester's ". . .detached stance allows him to take the side of the victim. . .his purpose is not to replace one system with another, but to free us from the fetters of all systems" (Otto 247). As the jester, Yunior is responsible for



much more than creating ridiculous images that provoke laughter. Under the identity of jester, these images come with a definite purpose: Yuniór reconstructs a history that “take[s] the side of the victim.” His humor is a tool that not only mocks the official history of the dictatorship, but that also does much more: it attests to the experiences of this history’s victims. Yuniór is not necessarily replacing the easily understood linear or even official history of the dictatorship with the history of the victim, rather he is releasing another side of this history. As jester, his “purpose is not to replace one system with another, but to free us from the fetters of all systems.” With the image of the hyper-sexualized Trujillo and the helpless mother and father, Yuniór gives another voice to the Trujillato’s history. Thus, his use of humor unleashes and liberates the horrible truths of the past.

### **Jesting with Footnotes**

Though Yuniór’s humor supports the fact that this story is a fictitious one with his references to sci-fi and comic books, his role as jester expands beyond his ability to humor through his incongruous language. Yuniór’s dictates the story through his duties that come with being the jester. As the jester, Yuniór “has this ethical element informing much of his humor, although he perhaps does this by showing life *as it is*” (Otto 44). Yuniór’s narration of this story functions beyond its telling: he has the responsibility, an ethical one at that, to share the story in light of its truths. Within and without the humor in *Oscar Wao*, the de León family history reaches beyond its own story: it becomes a representation of the history of the victims of the Trujillo Dictatorship. Thus the jester, keeping with his playful persona, uses clever footnotes to further represent the dark experience of the Trujillato.

As jester, Yuniór juggles with the story of the dictatorship in many ways, but it is through the footnotes in the novel, where the reader can materially witness his jestering. The footnotes that complement the main text in *Oscar Wao* are part of the performance of the jester. They attend to bits of history of the Trujillo dictatorship that are not fully elaborated in the central story. In his literary article, “A Postmodern Platano’s Trujillo,” Ignacio Lopez-Calvo argues that the footnotes have a distinct purpose in the novel: “Incidentally, these footnotes reflect Díaz’s totalizing attempt to grasp the entire reality of the period by considering, albeit in a succinct way, most of the historical landmarks and highlights of the Trujillato” (79). Thus, through Yuniór’s footnotes, Díaz is capable of fulfilling the story with more benchmark events of the dictatorship, adding more substance to the de León family history. Within the miniscule text, one finds first-time references to the genocide of Haitians that Trujillo carried out, Trujillo’s gangsters and officials like Johnny Abes Garcia, the Mirabal Sisters, and the Nigua and El Pozo de Nagua death camps. Other footnotes mention events that are outside the dictatorship, but nonetheless they are important and linked to it. Yuniór reflects upon the situation of his servant, Sobeida, when he lived in the Dominican Republic during his youth (253). He also alludes to the discovery of the Dominican Republic with the history of Anacaona, the “Founding Mother” of the country (244).

Within these footnotes the jester provides some of the answers to undoubtedly important parts of Dominican history, ones that also fact-check the story of the de León family. Yuniór informs us of some of the most important parts of history in a dialogue between the main text and the text that appears as an afterthought, the footnotes. He plays with history by switching the unheard, questionably factual stories of the victims of the dictatorship into the main dialogue and

placing the seemingly indisputable facts of this history beneath them. In an interview with *Slate* magazine, Junot Díaz recounts that there is indeed a very present jester within his novel: “The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that’s all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me” (O’Rourke). Thus Yuniors role as jester is unequivocally important in that he is able to entertain history in a different way: the silenced history of the victims of the dictatorship is now the pronounced one, it cannot be ignored. The “single voice” that Díaz refers to no longer exists because the jester has reconfigured the history of the dictatorship into the two voices of history: one of alleged fiction and one of alleged fact.

In Chapter Five, “Poor Abelard: 1944-1946,” Yuniors recounts the story of Abelard Cabral during the dictatorship. Yuniors observes the life of “the famous doctor” and his family as Trujillo began to sweep through the country taking young women from their families and raping them. Yuniors elaborates on their life in the beginning of the dictatorship and how the daughter, Jacquelyn de León, “was an innocent girl. . .Hit the books night and day, and would practice her French with both her father and with their servant Esteban El Gallo, who’d been born in Haiti and still spoke a pretty good frog” (218). From this intimate and innocent picture of Jacquelyn learning French with her Haitian servant, the jester interrupts the scene with one that stands in stark contrast: the genocide of Haitians carried out by the Trujillato. The footnote comes into play as the darker voice of history that gives the reader a dose of true facts:

After Trujillo launched the 1937 genocide of Haitian and Haitian-Dominicans, you didn’t see that many Haitian types working in the DR. Not until at least the late fifties. Esteban was

the exception because (a) he looked so damn Dominican, and (b) during the genocide, Socorro had hidden him inside her daughter Astrid's dollhouse. Spent four days in there, cramped up like a brown-skinned Alice. (218)

In this footnote, we are introduced to new information that recollects the Haitians massacre, also known as the Parsley Massacre that did, indeed, occur in 1937. The footnote, in a font size smaller than the main text, records the conditions that Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans endured during the dictatorship. Though Esteban, a character from the de León family story, is present in the main text, his character's story is given more credence as he is defined within a footnote that mentions a factual event of the dictatorship. The fact that "Esteban was an exception" reveals the improbable survival of most Haitian or Haitian-Dominicans during the Trujillato. Thus the jester moves the story to the bottom of the page where "the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king" (O'Rourke) ensures that there is a second voice to the story.

Yunior has the ability to provide us with a second voice that appears truthful through the footnotes because the jester is "a figure peripheral to the establishment even while operating at its core" (Otto 49). Yunior, as the jester, can navigate the novel through two histories: the one of the main text and the one of the footnotes. As Watcher, he is distanced from the story and thus he observes the history of the de León family from all sides. His peripheral stance as jester and as Watcher gives him the ability to footnote the de León story with necessary facts and characters of the dictatorship that are left out, or not emphasized in the main text. Thus the reader can more truthfully imagine the horrific life that Esteban and other Haitians experienced.

As a peripheral figure that performs at the center, the jester is essential to monitoring the history of the de León family. In the figure of the jester, Yuniór finds an essential position that grants him the power to intertwine the seemingly fictional story of the de León family with footnoted facts and explanations that make the fiction ever more so believable. The jester's peripheral stance is crucial in that it “. . .allows him to perceive reality perhaps more clearly than those who are less peripheral to society” (Otto 100). Though one may question even the factual footnotes of *Oscar Wao*, in Yuniór's role as jester, we find that the footnotes which are, like the jester, at the periphery of the story, ground the reader in the story with more essential facts than are witnessed in the main text.

Ultimately, the jester is not only responsible for his performance of humor, but he also is responsible for telling a story and protecting it. In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór assumes the identity of the jester through his narrative role as Watcher. From a distance, he hinges onto the de León family story, and uses his humor to unleash the hidden histories within it. He also plays with the story by adding footnotes that fool the reader. With a miniscule font, the jester tricks us into thinking the footnotes are just afterthoughts to the story, but instead we encounter some of the most brutal atrocities of the regime and a continuation of the victims' stories within them. Thus the jester dictates the course of this history and the humor that interrupts it.

Yuniór's function as the jester likens to the jester figure derived from Senegal and Gambia: “. . .they are the family bards, who learn and recite the family and national history. . .and the traditional stories and fables; they are family magicians, who must be present at all ceremonies and *whose advice must be taken*” (Gorer 43). Though not a part of the de León and Cabral family, Yuniór is responsible for protecting and telling their story. As the “family

magician” he uses *zafa* to remove the silence of the traumatic history of the dictatorship. If his “*advice must be taken*” then who is deny that these stories and their footnotes are not a true account of the history of the dictatorship?

Thus as the jester and the Watcher, Yuniór protects the de León family story by telling it. The jester, siding with the victim, becomes to a certain extent a liberator. A catharsis is achieved in that Yuniór releases the stories most peripheral to the linear and official history of the dictatorship, as undeniable histories themselves. In her article, “Addressing the *Fukú* In Us,” Daynalí Flores Rodríguez argues that Yuniór’s voice is defiant of the dictator’s story and thus, it gives a voice to characters that are usually in the periphery of this history: “By turning his back on the dictator and his minions’ individuality and subjectivity, Yuniór defies the Caribbean discourse that ties identity with power or lack of it. Instead the novel’s attention rests on the traditionally dispossessed characters of the dictator novel, who historically have lacked political power or authority” (95). Thus, through his act of jestering, Yuniór gives space to not only a different and nontraditional voice of this history, but rather to *multiple* voices that are usually in the peripheral of the narrative of the dictatorship.

### **Chapter III**

#### **This Tragedy is no Comedy: Does the de León Family History Survive?**

Though incongruities interrupt the clean *páginas en blanco* of *Oscar Wao*, they are nonexistent by the book's final formal chapter, Chapter Eight. In fact, the only incongruity that remains in the concluding chapters of this novel is an incongruity within consideration of the book as a whole. The unforgiving and the inescapable melancholic tone of Chapter Eight grates against the humor formed from incongruities in Chapters One through Seven of the story. We no longer hear the idiosyncrasies of Yunior's unyielding voice. Instead, we find ourselves drowning in the story of characters who themselves can no longer swim.

Chapter Eight of *Oscar Wao*, "The End of the Story," is only five pages in length. But its brevity is only in its physical number of pages, whereas its content is expansive in its profundity and emotive qualities. The reader experiences years of both Yunior's recuperation from his loss of Oscar and Lola, and his reflection on the de León family's past in a few pages. In the fourth section of the chapter, "The Dreams," Yunior recalls, "Took ten years to the day, went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while" (325). Within this chapter, large episodes of Yunior's life fill only a few *páginas en blanco*. These pages are fraught with the heavy years—almost decades—of both Yunior's failure to recover and his final rehabilitation after Oscar's death. In fact, they are filled with so much tragedy that Yunior admits he experienced "more lousy shit than you could imagine" (325). The reader too experiences this "lousy shit"—but definitely not ten years of it—that Yunior brings to the pages with the disappearance of what, up to then, had been his unexpected, and often humorous, erratic voice.

Yunior at this point is morose, and we feel this as he reflects upon the aftermath of Oscar's death, Beli's funeral, his failed relationship with Lola, his nightmares, his "lousy shit" and finally, his maturation into a functioning adult. Thus, it is within the five pages of Chapter Eight that the reader encounters each of these episodes individually, but absorbs them collectively, as a tragedy. This time the tragi-comedy we have experienced throughout the novel is stripped of its humor.

The reader confronts Chapter Eight not truly as "The End of the Story," as it is titled, but rather as the fundamental end of *Oscar Wao*. Indeed, the chapter is followed by both an untitled three-page section of Yunior rambling about his dreams, and then another two pages of "The Final Letter," which discloses Oscar's last assertions of his love for Ybón. But the pages 323 to 327 certainly represent the epilogue to this tragedy. Even Yunior admits that these following pages are much more of an afterthought to the story than a continuation of it: "It's almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty and retires" (329). Perhaps Díaz has intentionally titles Chapter Eight as the "The End of the Story" because it is within these pages that we encounter the true tragedy of *Oscar Wao*; there is no humor present to reconfigure its reality. In *Comic Effects*, Lewis states that ". . .the world of tragedy is defined by the failure or the collapse of humor" (18). I argue that Chapter Eight is truly the end of the story because it marks the end of humor—its failure. In this chapter we witness a change in Yunior's tone from his self-deprecating, comic book snappy vernacular to a self-reflective, sentimental and realistic one that echoes through the last pages of the story, and into our last witnessing of the de León family and the *fukú* that haunts them. It certainly is the realism of this chapter that makes it so distinct from the rest of the story.



Throughout the novel the reader feels tricked, sometimes in an entertaining way, by the humor that evolves out of unexpected images. But what evolves out of the unexpected of Chapter Eight is not humor, but rather the signal of its collapse: Beli and Oscar's deaths and funerals. But these deaths are only marked by their own existence. This time there is no presence of fantasy or the dance of the *bien pegao* to recreate them. Yuniór reflects, "They buried her next to her son, and Lola read a poem she had written, and that was it. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (323). The image of death is no longer absurd or comical, it no longer transcends itself. The sentiments it conjures of tragedy are truly felt by both the characters and the reader. The burial of Beli occurs, and the formal eulogy is read by Lola. Most importantly, within the scene Yuniór recites from *The Book of Common Prayer* with the phrase that derives from the Bible, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Far from the incongruities that interrupt even the most serious moments in the previous chapters of the novel, in this funeral scene of "The End of the Story," Yuniór's allusion rather reinforces the pain of loss.

With the arrival of Chapter Eight comes the departure of the de León family and their past from the preceding seven chapters. After the death of Oscar, Yuniór no longer has an Oscar to ridicule, and long gone are the days of Trujillo and his Mordor with the loss of Beli and her story. Yuniór is without Lola, and he no longer has the duty to reconfigure the de León family story. Now he has his own situation to confront and reconfigure. Thus, in this chapter we truly begin to feel not only the loneliness of Yuniór as a character, but also his resignation: "I did all I could" (320), he says in the chapter's opening. We also realize that his voice of a seemingly impenetrable, humorous narrator is deflated. This story's survival as a comedy was contingent upon either a happy ending or a continuation of humorous jesting. Yet, in this last chapter,

Yunior's voice is lost and thus the comedy is lost within the tragedy. Far from jokes and ridicule, Yunior presents us with three funerals: the funeral of Oscar, of Beli, and of humor. The chapter begins with the words, "That's pretty much it. We flew down to claim the body. We arranged the funeral. No one there but us, not even Al and Miggs" (323). The reader witnesses Yunior's resignation from his performance as the jester in these opening lines. Yunior remarks "that's pretty much it," and then continues to mention the funerals and burials of the de León family as if they were afterthoughts of the story. Even the rhythm of his speech has changed. He reports these events in staccato: "We flew down to claim the body. We arranged the funeral." It is as if he no longer narrates from his own voice, but rather reads from a script. Without incongruous images, the seriousness of these scenes becomes unmistakable and unavoidable. The funerals appear to be the most valid facts of the story because they are witnessed without incongruities, and Yunior is very present both within his narration and character here. The Trujillato appears to be of a distant and distinct reality—a reality that is unconnected to Chapter Eight. Most of all, there is a total absence of Yunior's hyperbolic humor and jestering. No ridicule is to be found here, only the bare facts.

The fate of Yunior and the de León family occupies this chapter's story line. Yunior's recollections of the past are brief and solemn. He first recalls the ending to Oscar's fateful story:

Four times the family hired lawyers but no charges were ever filed.

The embassy didn't help and neither did the government. Ybón, I hear, is still living in Mirador Norte, still dancing at the Riverside but La Inca sold the house a year later, moved back to Baní. Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of

our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are. (323-324)

We observe that there is no relief within the aftermath of Oscar's death. Yuniór reflects on the fact that there is no help; there is no justice years after the end of the dictatorship. Yuniór explains the circumstances of Oscar's death: "Four times the family hired lawyers but no charges were ever filed." Decades after the Trujillato, there are still victims, there are still dictators, and there is still violence within the cane fields. Thus, the very end of the de León family's story only comes to reveal this tragedy without its reconstruction into a comedy. The embassy, the government, Ybón, and the "ten million" Dominicans both on the island, and in the United States are forever stuck in the dictatorship that still dictates, even after its demise.

Lola's bitter recollection, "Ten million Trujillos is all we are," signifies that with the circumstances of the death of Oscar, nothing and no one has changed. The violence persists with the violators, victimizers, and the misogynistic men. It appears that Oscar died the only romantic man that set foot in the story. The Gangster, el capitan, Jack Pujols, Archimedes, Oscar and Lola's unknown father, and even Yuniór are just subversions of Trujillo and his misogynistic regime built on the violation of women. "Ten million Trujillos is all we are" is the reminder that the misogyny of the regime persists even within the victims of the regime. Lola concludes that the Dominican Republic is forever ingrained with violence, especially against women that emerges from both the victims and the victimizers of the Trujillato. There is no humor to disguise this fact, even if, for a moment.

In these situations we witness the *fukú* in its most real sense—no longer is it a fantastical curse, nor is it explained within the interruptions of Yuniór's witty voice. The *fukú* is not a curse

of exaggerated fears or superstitions, but rather it is the true injustices that remain after the dictatorship, and that survive to reinstitute the tragedies of the Trujillato. Oscar was murdered by the captain's gangsters, no different from the Gangster's own sub-gangsters that nearly murdered Beli de León during the height of the Trujillo dictatorship. What also echoes the dictatorship is the helplessness of the people. There is no one to help, and even the seemingly safe notion of being second-generation Dominican émigré does not change the fact that the island is forever isolated in its own desperate reality, its very own Mordor. For Yuniór, there is no escape route. Ybón and La Inca will forever remain in a history that has no true *contrahistoria*. There is no joke to be played on this reality. In my last chapter, I examined the absurdities and the incongruities of Yuniór's narration, but these are nowhere to be found in this purely "factual" account of reality. In this chapter, absent are the Sauron's and the Anthony's followed by exclamation points. This time Yuniór has no reservations for his or the story's melancholy. This melancholy is unmasked. Yuniór reports, "Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country." Yuniór reveals to us that at this point, there is no humor that can recover this country from the dictatorship. The magic realism of the de León family's past is over.

Thus, the tragedy of the past is marked in its perpetual existence. We are presented with a past that permeates the present in both the untitled prologue of the book and in this final chapter. In the prologue the past comes into the present in the form of the *fukú* curse: "It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond" (3). This "fukú story" of the de León family is proof that the curse still lives into the generations beyond. Oscar, born in the United States, is murdered on the island in the same violent way that victims of the Trujillo dictatorship

were tortured and killed. But even though Yuniór admits to the inevitable *fukú* curse of the Trujillato, he also finds a possible counterspell to the curse: *zafa*. *Zafa*, though just a one word, is a solution—or Yuniór’s own solution—to *fukú*, in the form of a written story: “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). Thus it is in the end where the reader discovers if this *zafa* is truly a counterspell: if the *fukú* has been defeated and the foreseen story’s course has changed, or if the *fukú* continues to reside within the superstitions and traumas that are provoked by the past. Throughout the novel we witness and experience the possibility of a “*zafa* counterspell” in the dramatic alteration of the story of the Trujillo dictatorship through humor. But it is this change in the story that easily disappears with the change in tone of Yuniór’s narration. By the time we reach Chapter Eight, there is no more counterspell. The transience of the *zafa* appears as permanent as the *fukú* curse.

In Chapter Eight, as Yuniór affirms the dark realities of the present, he does not tackle them with humor. If there ever was *zafa*, there is none now. We encounter the *zafa*-less present within the poignant reflections of Beli: “I did all I could. You did enough, Mami, Lola said, but she refused to hear it. Turned her ruined back to us. I did all I could and it still wasn’t enough” (323). Here, tragedy is met with honest words. This is the first time Beli admits to her failures as a mother, and also the first time where Yuniór’s voice does not interrupt a sentimental and sorrowful scene. “I did all I could” not only signifies Beli’s final repentance, but also reveals the fact that nothing has changed from the beginning of the story, where Lola describes Beli as “that kind of mother: who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her” (56). “I did all I could and it still wasn’t enough,” reassures us that nothing has changed within the de León family. The abuse of Beli upon her children continues as proof that the curse still exists.

We also witness the presence of the past and *fukú* when Beli “Turned her ruined back to us.” This too, is a reminder that the traumas of the past, or in other words, the *fukú*, will always remain. Beli’s “ruined back” is a remnant of the dictatorship. It derives from her displacement from her family, and her adoption into one that was abusive and ruined her back by throwing hot oil onto it. Thus, just like the scar on Beli’s back, the permanence of the dictatorship remains fixed within the relationships of the de León family and within the relationships of the generations beyond who are linked and bound to the dictatorship. Beli’s relationship to her children parallels the scar etched into her back: it is forever permanent and unable to change. This inability to change is reflected in Yunior’s narration in Chapter Eight. There is no humor to recreate the situation into something more lighthearted. Thus, with the sincerity of both Beli and Yunior, we can observe that the *fukú* curse remains fixed. There is no *zafa* to repair it and through Yunior’s narration, Beli’s forthright declaration of “I did all I could and it still wasn’t enough” (323), confirms this.

Though the declarations, “I did all I could” and “I did all I could and it still wasn’t enough” appear to be Beli’s confessions as a failed mother, perhaps these confessions are also Yunior’s. Due to its set-up on the page, this monologue is not inextricably linked to any one character: “I did all I could. / You did enough, Mami, Lola said, but she refused to hear it. Turned her ruined back to us. / I did all I could and it still wasn’t enough” (323). “I did all I could” is in dialogue with “You did enough” but even so, this phrase stands alone in the fact that it falls in the last true chapter of the story, “The End of the Story,” where Yunior himself confesses to both his failures and the failures and triumphs of the other characters of the story. Thus, “I did all I could” could be interpreted as Yunior’s own admittance to his culpability. It

appears that Yunion is referring to his inability to fix that which is broken or, rather, cursed by the *fukú*. Beli is the failed mother of relationships, but he is the failed father of the story—the unsuccessful jester to this narrative. Not only does Yunion outrightly admit that the past cannot be repaired, but he does so in a voice void of any humor. “I did all I could” is situated into the chapter without allusions to *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Twilight Zone*. There is a complete absence of humor within this situation unlike in the previous chapters where we witness Yunion’s attempt against the *fukú* with his counterspell of humor. But in this case, Yunion is not even willing to ridicule himself or the situation. He delivers us a scene with a seriousness that we have not previously witnessed.

This seriousness is maintained throughout Chapter Eight with the persistence of Yunion’s sincerity. In the segment following the funeral of Beli and Oscar, Yunion dwells on the state of his relationship with Lola. Even though the reader is aware that Yunion sleeps around and has trouble maintaining his relationship with Lola, it is here that he admits to his faults without ridiculing the situation to make it appear less serious. We are given the story as it is: “she said, Good-bye, Yunion, please take good care of yourself, and for about a year I scromfed strange girls and alternated between Fuck Lola and these incredibly narcissistic hopes of reconciliation that I did nothing to achieve” (324). Yunion is honest in his storytelling, and thus is honest with both the reader and himself. He confesses his “narcissistic hopes of reconciliation,” in which he did nothing to actually reconcile. Yes, Yunion says in his typical crude voice, “scromfed strange girls”—the only definition of scromfed can be found in *Urban Dictionary* as “to devour”—and “Fuck Lola,” but this suggestive vocabulary does not interrupt the scene as it has in the past chapters. The reader is not provoked to laugh.

In Chapter Four, “Sentimental Education,” we witness an unsentimental and unreflective Yuni6r as he tries to manipulate his way into maintaining his relationship with Lola: “What I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab. But if you thought I was going to do that, then you don’t know Dominican men. Instead of focusing on something hard and useful like, say, my own shit, I focused on something easy and redemptive” (175). Here Yuni6r is well aware of his unfaithfulness and consequentially, the dim prospects of a steady relationship with Lola, but he unapologetically avoids repairing that which is important. Yuni6r finds the excuse of “you don’t know Dominican men” to further avoid the problems of his relationship. The reader realizes how absorbed and influenced Yuni6r is by the Dominican machismo that derives from the Trujillato; he places his fetish for sleeping with different women over love. It is in Chapter Eight that we find Yuni6r looking back onto his behavior and realizing his narcissism. Yuni6r no longer exempts himself from relationships of love because he falls into the category of “Dominican men.” Instead, we find him willing to take agency for the failure and ultimately, closure of his relationship with Lola: “She was the kind of girlfriend God gives you young, so you’ll know loss the rest of your life” (124). This time, Yuni6r does not allude to an incongruous image to stave off or distract from such serious matters. Referring to God, he is purely realistic and definitive. He validates the situation by engaging with God as the subject that determines the true destiny of the relationship. In fact, neither Yuni6r nor the reader laughs at the reference to God because here it does not appear ironic.

Yuni6r also reflects upon his relationship with more age: we can observe that this is no longer the sex-crazed Yuni6r of his college years, but rather one who is retiring into a more pensive phase of life. Thus, not only are we permitted to witness Yuni6r’s self-resignation from



humor, but we also witness his growth and maturation as a character. But this maturation comes too late, after Lola has permanently left Yunion. This further serves the fact that this story is, indeed, a tragic one. Although Yunion and the reader acknowledge the grievances of his loss of Lola, they do so in a chapter that is layered among other tragedies. There is no relief from start to finish.

No matter how much Yunion has intertwined himself with the past of the de León family, he will never be a part of the de León family. Yunion even remarks on this depressing realization: “Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we would be in bed together like the old times. . .and I’d finally try to say the words that could have saved us. \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. But before I can shape the vowels I wake up. My face is wet, and that’s how you know it’s never going to come true. Never, ever” (327). Yunion admits that “all hope died” and that his run-ins with Lola only further induce him into dreaming about lying in bed with Lola and proclaiming—what the reader guesses—“I love you”. But although we witness Yunion in the unreality of his dream, it is only momentary—we are never fully allowed to plunge into this image as we are in the previous chapters with their consistent allusions to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Twilight Zone*. Instead, Yunion and the reader awake to a jolting, “Never, ever.” The dream is never ever going to be a reality and not even incongruous images or self-ridicule can indulge us into believing otherwise or, more simply, just denying the painful truth.

Slight optimism to this dark ending surfaces within the theme of Yunion and Lola’s relationship, but this time Lola’s daughter is involved. Yunion finds himself coincidentally colliding into Lola and her family in Paterson: “Believe it or not, we still see each other. . .Every now and then when the stars are aligned I run into her, at rallies, at bookstores we used to chill

at, on the streets of NYC. Sometimes Cuban Rubén is with her, sometimes not. Her daughter, though, is always there” (326-327). The fact that Yunior and Lola still find each other years from when their lives have dispersed appears significant. In fact, both of them have stayed in New Jersey—Lola is even in Paterson—where the bleak past is almost as present as it is in the Dominican Republic. But despite the fact that the scene of Yunior acquainting himself with Lola, her daughter Isis and even Cuban Ruben may appear joyous, it cultivates tragedy even within the small nuances of these Yunior and Lola run-ins. At one point, Lola instructs her daughter to greet Yunior because “He was your tío’s best friend” (327). A disfigured dialogue follows: “Hi, tío, she says reluctantly. Tío’s friend, she corrects. Hi, tío’s friend” (327). This scene could find significance in the fact that, for a moment, Yunior is part of the de León family because behind Isis’s misinterpretation of “best friend” for “tío” or “uncle,” lies a profound relationship and connection between Yunior and Lola’s daughter.

But another interpretation of this scene is one in which an emphasis is placed on the matter that Yunior is not “tío.” His future with Lola and Isis is surely over. Lola is quick to insist that Yunior is “tío’s friend,” and thus we can no longer hold onto the small mistake of words as a possibility for this relationship to survive. This fact is reiterated just a paragraphs below when Yunior reflects both upon his romantic relationship with Lola and the dim future in general. He continues to dwell on the run-ins with Lola and Isis, and we can observe that he is still attempting to accept and reconcile what he has lost. He reflects, “It ain’t too bad, though. During our run-ins we smile, we laugh, we take turns saying her daughter’s name. I never ask if her daughter has started to dream. I never mention our past. All we ever talk about is Oscar” (327).

Yunior is relying on the “run-ins” to maintain and preserve the little relationship he has left with Lola and Isis. After all, Lola and Isis are the only de León’s who remain in their family’s direct lineage. Most of all, they are the only ones left who know about Oscar.

The last line of “The End of the Story” reveals the fact that, essentially, this novel remains a tragedy. It is Yunior and the de León family’s need to preserve Oscar’s story that also preserves the tragedy of this story. The last line, “All we ever talk about is Oscar,” indicates the need to protect both the memory and the history of Oscar de León. Yunior and Lola remind themselves and those who are left in the de León family—Isis—of the tragedy of Oscar: he was a victim of the Trujillo-inherited violence in the Dominican Republic, and all of the *fukú* that comes with it. Thus, “All we ever talk about is Oscar” reminds us that Oscar’s tragedy and the tragedy of the de León family still lives, and that most of all, it will continue to live. Yunior cautions us that Oscar’s bleak past is not to be forgotten—he and Lola guard Oscar’s story in their present lives. Without them, it would surely be another story outlived by the *fukú*. Thus, the tragedy will always creep even into a seemingly settled future where Lola has a family and Yunior is a community college professor.

In “The End of the Story,” there is no humor in the conquest to preserve the history of Oscar and the rest of the de León family. Yunior’s determination to guard it does not involve images of *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Twilight Zone*. The images in this chapter come only in Yunior’s recurring dream, a dream that is not interrupted with fantastical allusion, but rather a dream that is riddled with images that look back to Oscar’s fate. Yunior provides us an explanation of his dream that appears delusional: “. . .Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. Zafa. Sometimes, though, I look

up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (325). Oscar, though dead, not only pervades Yuniór’s life in his conversations with Lola, but he also appears in his dreams as a character without a face, with seamless hands and a blank book. Unlike in the previous chapters, where Oscar is our “nerdboy” who is defined by his overweight body, the only Oscar we see here is one who has no face, and where the only description of his body pertains to his “seamless hands.” In this atypical vision of Oscar, Yuniór reminds us of the true tragedy of this story. Oscar’s seamless hands, the blank pages of his book, and his mask appear to remind us of both his own tragedy and the greater tragedy of those who were victims of the Trujillo Dictatorship. In his literary criticism, “Conjectures on ‘Americanity’ and Junot Díaz’s ‘Fukú Americanus’ in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” José David Saldívar contends that the dream sequence in the ending of *Oscar Wao* pertains to the fact that “Even long after the Trujillo dictatorship had ended in the 1960s, political democracy in the Dominican Republic continued, as Díaz suggests, to exclude and “blank out” from the nation the social subjects like La Inca, Belicia, Lola, and Oscar” (133). Just as we witnessed Oscar’s disappearance with the inaction of the embassy and the government in the beginning of this chapter, we are again reminded of his disappearance from history with Yuniór’s dream. Oscar’s fate is erased from the historical records and only exists within what little Yuniór and Lola know. Thus, the masked and faceless Oscar who holds a book with blank pages represents the erased history of the victim of the Trujillato. The victim is faceless because with his forgotten history, he is not to be remembered. He is not even part of the past.

Thus, this book of blank pages truly accounts for the lost history of Oscar and other victims. Saldívar suggests that there is an excluded and “blank[ed] out” history of the de León

family. Yunior's dream arrives at the end of this novel to ensure us that we are reminded of the tragedy of these missing histories. It is easier to observe the stories of the de León family and their intersection with the dictatorship when Yunior is narrating through them with his incongruous allusions. But it is a year later, when Yunior reflects upon the fate of Oscar and Beli, that all humor is lost. We are left with the bitter and tragic reality that all of the histories of the victims are *páginas en blanco*, they are left forever untold and forgotten. Thus, Oscar and his fate are remembered outside the dream only by Yunior, Lola and perhaps Isis, who reclaim Oscar's story by only talking about him within their conversations. This is the only circumstance in which Oscar will be remembered. Tragedy strikes within both dreams and reality in "The End of the Story." In the present, the memories that remain of the past and its victims cannot be altered by incongruous images and the humor that comes from them.

### **Untitled Epilogue**

Following the final chapter, "The End of the Story," the readers find themselves in a three-page, untitled epilogue. These three pages present us with a tragic situation: the fate of the de León family history conveyed through Yunior's poignant and somber tone. We confront a crucial question: will this story survive to be recognized alongside the history of the Trujillato? Or will it be lost with the other marginalized and unknown stories of victims of the dictatorship? In this section, Yunior again is self-reflective, and though there are the references to comic books and unexpected insertions of Spanish, there is no humor to be found within these last pages of *Oscar Wao*.

Even at the end of his storytelling-jester stint, Yunior is still burdened by Oscar's history,

a history that in the present situation only survives within himself and Lola. Yuniór opens with, “It’s almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty and retires at last to the Blue Area of the Moon, not to be here again until the Last Days” (329). Yuniór identifies himself as the comic book character of the Watcher once again within his narrative role. But this time his duty seems even more painful and burdensome than in the previous 328 pages of the book. His purpose of unearthing and preserving the history of the de León family is coming to an end. His exclamation, “It’s almost done. Almost over” suggests that not only is the story’s capacity to carry on now plummeting, but the reader’s commitment to the story is also waning. Just as the Watcher “retires” to his far off cosmic place, this story too, along with its reader, is destined to retire. Perhaps, like the Watcher’s fate, the story is “not to be heard again.” It will be buried deep with the other *fukúed* histories.

In her essay, “Reassembling the Fragments,” Monica Hanna examines Yuniór’s struggle to maintain the presence of the de León family’s story. Hanna concludes that “It is this internalization of the Trujillan historiography that Yuniór battles throughout the text by positing an alternative based on memory and inclusion” (506). As Watcher, jester, and narrator, even into the last pages of the book, Yuniór attempts to re-imagine the history of the Trujillo dictatorship through an alternative history based on the de León family. It is within the last pages of the book, that we become aware of Yuniór’s battle to keep the story of the de León family alive in our memories and not buried beneath the official, political history of the dictatorship, a history that does not encompass its own victims’ stories. By stating “It’s almost done. Almost over,” Yuniór seems to question our willingness as readers to preserve this memory—if we can tolerate the pain of remembering the story of the victim.

In his essay, Miller concludes that the reader plays an important and distinct role in the preservation of the history of the de León family. Miller affirms that “*Oscar Wao* argues—if the novel can be said to have an argument—not so much that genres and their boundaries should be collapsed, but that each reader already collapses, internalizes, and reassembles them to create his or her own account” (104). Thus, it is within this untitled epilogue, that Yuniór confronts the possibility that the de León family story is in the hands of the reader. He can be the Watcher, the protector of the story, and both Lola and he can guard the memory of Oscar, Beli, and Abelard, but Yuniór has limited power in influencing the reader’s interpretation of the story. As Miller suggests, in this history reconfigured by genres and incongruous images, ultimately it is the reader who decides how the story is to be interpreted: if it is one that sits at the margins of the history of the dictatorship or if it is central to it. The consequence of this selection bears its weight on how the history of the dictatorship is remembered.

Even as far into the story as the epilogue, Yuniór continues to search for another keeper of history, perhaps another Watcher of this story. In this search, Yuniór finds some solace in the existence of Lola’s daughter, Isis. In a vision that appears to be reality to both Yuniór and the reader, Yuniór imagines Isis as this very keeper of history. Isis arrives at his door, and Yuniór bequeaths her Oscar’s writings and comic books. Yuniór professes his most profound hope: “And maybe, just maybe, if she’s 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” (330-331). Yuniór’s wish for Isis to “put an end to it” alludes to his hope that Isis could be responsible for not only protecting the history of the de León family, but also for ending the blanking out of the histories of the victims of the Trujillato. In her examination of this scene, Hanna concludes

that “Yunior thus asserts the importance of writing a historical narrative, of unearthing the past, as a way to protect against the fukú that works through silencing and ignorance” (516). Thus, Isis appears to be the only hope to changing the documentation of history. She will guard and reproduce the historical narrative, and assume Yunior’s position as the Watcher and as the recorder of personal histories.

Though Isis is surely the hope of a future where the memories of the de León family continue to be preserved, we are also reminded by Yunior himself, that this scene is purely imagined. Yunior continues, “That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream. . . And yet there are other days, when I’m downtrodden or morose, when I find myself at my desk late at night, unable to sleep, flipping through (of all things) Oscar’s dog-eared copy of *Watchmen*” (331). After dreaming about Isis arriving at his door, Yunior awakens to his reality: Isis is not at his door and he is alone with Oscar’s things, and most importantly with Oscar’s history in his hands. It is only “on [his] best days” that Yunior hopes and dreams for Isis to come knocking. Thus beneath Yunior’s dreams and deceptions of the future, there is a much more complex and tragic situation. With the loss of incongruous images in the final phases of this story, the true tragedy emerges: we confront the presumption that there is a minimal likelihood that the de León family’s story will survive.

Yunior does not play jester to this central fact. There are no incongruous images at the disposal of our laughter in this scene. Only the relic of a comic book of Oscar’s past provides any obscure reference to a different world. But this time, the comic reference comes directly from the book itself, it is separate from Yunior’s narration and jestering. As Yunior flips through a copy of *Watchmen*, he encounters the last chapter, “A Stronger Loving World.” Yunior



remarks that Oscar has circled the title with pen. In fact, this title is the only text that Oscar has ever defaced. The fact that Oscar circled the title “A Stronger Loving World,” suggests that despite all the *fukú* within his past and present, he had hope in a future that was not overshadowed by the curse. Maybe in this future, there would be a world of love, not violence. But Yuniór pushes aside Oscar’s wishful thinking. He provides us with a direct dialogue from the chapter of the comic book that reminds us that tragedy triumphs over comedy in *Oscar Wao*: “Veidt says: ‘I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end.’ And Manhattan, before fading from our Universe, replies: ‘In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends’” (331). This dialogue between the Watchmen characters, Adrian Veidt and Dr. Manhattan, acknowledges Yuniór’s fear that the *fukú* will never end and that the denial of the histories of the victims of the Trujillato will persist. The dialogue could be read as if Yuniór has inserted himself into it. Yuniór is Adrian Veidt asking if he fulfilled his position as Watcher and jester and thus, “did the right thing” by preserving the de León family story. But it is Dr. Manhattan’s response that provides Yuniór and the reader with a reality check: “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” is the final statement to this untitled epilogue.

This apocalyptic ending to the Watchmen is also predictive of the tragic and doomed ending of the story of *Oscar Wao*. It symbolizes the fact that the *fukúed* histories of the Trujillo dictatorship never end because there are always victims’ stories that never survive, and perhaps the story of the de León family will be just one of those. In Pamela Rader’s article on the *páginas en blanco* in *Oscar Wao*, “Trawling in Silences,” she declares, “If official History is written by those in power, it comes at the expense of the unofficial, oral—and written—histories of those not in power: the people” (10). The official history recorded and available to readers is one

shaped by those in power, in this case, by Trujillo and those close to him. Yuniór's attempt to expose the "unofficial, oral—and written—histories" of the de León family is not and will never be a battle won. Without the guarantee of Isis as the inheritor of the unofficial history, Oscar's story becomes buried underneath "official history." With "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends," Dr. Manhattan reminds us that it is this "official history" sponsored and enforced by those in power that will never end.

Thus tragedy remains through the ending of the untitled epilogue. Like the rest of the story, there are the unexpected, comic book allusions but this time, they are not at all humorous. Here, the difference is that the images of the comic book characters do not interrupt the tragic scene, but rather enforce it. The comic book reference from the *Watchmen* arrives not to distract us from reality with laughter, but rather to support the fact that the de León family story is likely another victim's story that disappears while official history continues to be recorded.

### **"The Final Letter"**

Just when we believe again that this tragedy is finally over, Oscar's "Final Letter" from the Dominican Republic arrives to the de León home in Paterson eight months after his death. The content of the final letter is unexpected. Rather than a manuscript of one of Oscar's sci-fi novels, in these brief two pages, Yuniór and the reader witness a testimony of love: Oscar's reflection on his last days with Ybón, and his realization of the transformative power of sex. The last line of both "The Final Letter" and of the novel celebrates Oscar's reflections on sex: "So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (335). The last line of this novel may appear shocking, given the fact that after the

tragedy undiminished by Yuniór's humorous tone in both "The End of the Story" and the untitled epilogue, there lies a happy, and what could be interpreted as a somewhat humorous, ending. In her analysis of the ending of *Oscar Wao*, Hanna finds that "The letter closes the novel in a way that is the antithesis of Kurtz's proclamation ("The horror! The horror!") in Joseph Conrad's colonial literary classic *The Heart of Darkness*" (515-516). Oscar has uncovered "the beauty" of the intimacies of love and sex. The horror!" It appears that Oscar has reconfigured Conrad's tragic declaration into a happy-ending.

In contrast to Hanna's interpretation, I argue that "The beauty! The beauty!" is not the antithesis to Kurtz's tragic proclamation, but rather another instance of the same irony that is witnessed in Yuniór's voice throughout the novel. In other words, underlying "The beauty! The beauty!" is truly "The horror! The horror!" At first, we surmise that though Oscar's death was tragic, he was able to find love in a country mired in the violent machismo culture inherited from the Trujillato. But this message is layered as is the rest of this story. Just like the easily accepted "official history" of the Trujillo dictatorship that buries the tragedy of the victims' stories, we find a tragedy beneath a palatable ending. Doubt underlies the end of *Oscar Wao*. It provokes the reader to wonder if "The beauty!" is truly Oscar's triumph in his quest for love, or if it is the sad truth that the quest for love is a doomed one. The inherited *fukú* from the Trujillato will always mark the past, the present and the future of its survivors and its victims.

Thus, it is within the final pages of *Oscar Wao* that we encounter the true tragedy of these last utterances: that if we are quick to judge "The beauty! The beauty!" we accept the story with its happy ending as it is—we do not seek to understand it within the broader purpose it serves to our perception and awareness of the de León family history. To the reader, there is humor in

Oscar's epiphany of the delights of love and sex. When he writes, "Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" one laughs at the image of the big "nerdboy" in a relationship with an experienced, older Dominican woman. Oscar's exclamation reveals his innocence and inexperience, and thus the reader has difficulty in taking the situation seriously. Oscar's words, the last words of the story, leave us laughing. Or do they?

We would like to think that indeed, in the end of *Oscar Wao*, there is humor. But our reading of the scene as comical is, after all, our interpretation. The reader's judgment of the last scene of the story is one that ridicules Oscar because he is a character who is incongruous with his social reality. Oscar is one of the few Dominican men to have sex so late in his coming of age and when he finally does so, his experience is one of true affection for a partner who may not share his same passion. The image of Ybón emphasizes the absurdity of the relationship: ". . .she was a solid thirty-six, perfect age for anybody but a stripper, In the close-ups you can see the crow's feet, and she complained all the time about her little belly, the way her breasts and her ass were starting to lose their firm, which was why, she said, she had to be in the gym five days a week. . .when you're forty—pffft!—it's a full-time occupation" (285). Ybón, almost twice Oscar's age, is a retired and aging prostitute. While Ybón worries about her aging, sagging body and goes to the gym, Oscar, still in his teen years, sits around reading comic books and writing sci-fi. Ybón's over-worrying about her body and the fact that her profession is based on her looks, is incongruous with Oscar's negligence of his body and his disdain for working out. As Oscar wallows in his heaviness, Ybón struggles with her "full-time occupation" of keeping her body fit in order to survive. With Ybón as the aging prostitute and Oscar as the young, sex-starved and overweight comic book fanatic, we conjure an incongruous image that is, at first

sight, funny.

In this particular situation our laughter directly ridicules Oscar. In the previous chapters of the book, we laughed at the ridicule that we absorbed through Yuniór's voice and tone, but never did we laugh as a result of an interaction with Oscar's own voice. Thus the humor that we may seek from Oscar's revelation is one that belittles his character and his quest for love in the world of the Trujillato and *fukú*. But to laugh at his passionate confession is to take his voice away, to dismiss the power of his story. It is the reader who has the ability to empower the story, or to belittle it. If we derive humor from Oscar's last utterance in the novel, then we consciously choose to reject the true meaning of his situation. Therefore, our ridicule of Oscar becomes a way to re-silence his story as a victim of the Trujillo dictatorship. In fact, Hanna encounters that in the novel, "A ruling principle of the historical trajectory presented by Yuniór is that of love, while a ruling principle of the Trujillan model is that of violence" (504). Thus love, and specifically Oscar's love, is not a question to take lightly within this story; it is a way to reconfigure the official political history of the dictatorship—one that is inherently entangled with violence.

If the reader interprets Oscar's romance as a ludicrously hopeless one that invites us to laugh more at this nerd in love, then we repress the image of Oscar as the only character who truly encounters love within a country cursed with violence and its resulting traumas. Oscar's declaration, "Diablo! If only I'd known" is profound because though he was a victim of the dictatorship's violence, he also overcame the violence with love. He changed the official, linear history based on the violent and political events of the Trujillato, to a more humanized history. Hanna surmises that ". . .the novel implicitly wonders if this fictional representation is not more

truthful than the official history in light of all that the latter excludes” (509). The history of the de León family, though “fiction,” functions as a *contrahistoria* to the official and linear histories of the dictatorship. It tells a side of history left out of the selective memory of the typical recording of history of the Trujillato. The reader too has a selective memory for history and ultimately decides if this story of “fiction” is one that contributes to her understanding of the Trujillato. In her article, “The Trujillato and Testimonial Fiction,” Sandra Cox emphasizes the reader’s role in the interpretation of this novel’s history:

The testimonial function of the novel ultimately culminates in a deliberative narrative that frames readers as “decision makers” who should “determine whether or not to undertake future action to address the traumatic representations the novel presents (Nance 23-4). This culminatory function could encourage shifts in the paradigm of representation for those perspectives unrecorded in official histories. (111)

As readers we have to be conscious ones. It is our duty to make sure that we are lifting the “Plátano curtain” (“the banana curtain”) of Trujillo’s regime and not supporting it. If we understand the message that Díaz sends with *fukú* and *zafa* through Yuniór, then we contribute to changing the official and linear history of the dictatorship that already exists. In this essay, I have shown that the humor in *Oscar Wao* is a crucial instrument in the construction of a multiple voice, a distinct representation of the history of the Trujillato. It is Junot Díaz’s masterful *contrahistoria*.

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