

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: No Way Out but into the Cane Fields

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A part of the Dominican American diaspora, Junot Diaz writes about the experience in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* drawing from his Dominican roots, the streets of New Jersey, as well as his prodigious reading; the result is a high-energy linguistic display of Spanglish, street slang, Tolkien's Elvish language, "nerd" speak, and Superhero lingo. One sentence can incorporate all of these disparate elements, or one page can move from the comic narrative to a lengthy footnote with historical information. Published in 2007, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel excited critics, reviewers, and the reading public alike. At the time, the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, Deborah Treisman called Diaz's voice "unlike any I've come across, with its combination of the lyrical and the vernacular, of English and Spanish, of speech rhythms and internal reflection. It has a kind of unstoppable energy, an inexorable drive forward—even when his stories move in difficult or tragic directions" (Tillotson).

The novel's title reveals that Diaz uses the life of Oscar Wao, the nickname of Oscar de Leon, to guide his narrative. The book jacket describes the novel's protagonist as a "sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd. A New Jersey romantic who dreams of becoming the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien, and most of all, of finding love." Telling Oscar's story grows into recounting the experiences of his family (his sister, his mother, and his grandfather) as well as the history of the Dominican Republic, from the US-backed occupation to Trujillo's dictatorship to the massive diaspora following Trujillo's ascension. Oscar serves as a metaphor for recovering a lost Dominican Republic and its troubled colonial history (Ch'ien 3).

In an interview with the Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat, Diaz addresses the gaps in Dominican history: "So much of our experience as Caribbean diasporic peoples, so much of it, exists in silence. How can we talk about our experiences in any way if both our own local culture and the larger global culture doesn't want to talk about them and actually resists our attempt to create language around them?" (Danticat 4). To enter into these historical cracks and to tell Oscar's story, Diaz uses a narrator named Yunior, the same narrator of his first short story collection *Drown*. Yunior is Oscar's college roommate and friend, who only gradually identifies himself and his own part in the story. Yunior struggles with how best to tell Oscar's story because of Oscar's and his family's importance to him and also because the story begins to take on the entire history of the Dominican Republic, also his country of origin. He self-consciously references his writing, "the manuscript," "this book," and "our tale" (114, 10, 90). In attempting to research the

story of the de Leon family and the history of the nation, he continually confronts events shrouded in silence and research that goes nowhere, so he reconstructs an otherwise unrecoverable history.

A primary reason for the gaps is that much of the Dominican Republic's history was violently suppressed and covered in silence by the Trujillo regime. From 1930 to 1961, Rafael Trujillo ruled the country through brutality, intimidation, and secrecy. The novel's first footnote references Trujillo and continues for two pages. Assuming the reader's ignorance of Dominican history, it gives some historical information but more of the lived experience on the streets. For example, Trujillo is described by Díaz as a "portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon era haberdashery" (2). We are told that he "treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. . . . [He was] famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself . . . for building one of the largest militaries in the hemisphere . . . for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates . . . for stripping friends and allies of their positions and properties for no reason at all; and for his almost supernatural abilities" (2-3). The reader comes to understand Trujillo's web of control, his systematic terror over all socioeconomic groups, and his thought control through intellectual conformity. He takes over not only physical spaces by renaming landmarks and cities after himself but also enters imaginary spaces by acting like he is more of a supernatural force than a human being.

Ultimately, Díaz is interested not in Trujillo himself but his dominant persistence within the Dominican cultural imaginary. Even while he lived, Trujillo, for most Dominicans, was a distant and mythic figure, a name whispered in fear. In one of the two epigraphs, Trujillo is compared to Galactus, a god-like figure in a *Fantastic Four* comic book. The epigraph reads: "Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?" With this fantasy reference, Díaz emphasizes Trujillo's ominous powers, and how in many important ways, the mythology of a dictator becomes a compelling narrative that breeds terror, its own form of writing. As Díaz tells Danticat:

Trujillo's real writing . . . was done on the flesh and psyches of the Dominican people. That tends to be the writing that the Trujillos of the world are truly invested in, and it's the kind of writing that lasts far longer and resonates far deeper than many of its victims would care to admit. . . . [H]is "work" deformed, captured, organized us Dominicans in ways we barely understand[.] (6)

The dominance of Trujillo's legacy on the Dominican psyche and its inscription on both Dominican and US national histories is what challenged Díaz to write what Monica Hanna calls "resistance history" (500).

The narrator Yunior reassembles the Caribbean's fragmented past and makes use of fantasy in order to write a history that he sees "as more truthful than the accounts that purport authoritative control over the past because of the latter's omissions" (Hanna 501). The desire to present a Dominican history to resist dictatorial conformity offers freedom to a writer. So too, do the gaps or silences. Yunior researches and interviews, but he also imaginatively recreates elements of the

story that are otherwise inaccessible, and at the same time, the reader is compelled to participate in the process of reconstruction.

To underscore the significance of this historical reconstruction, Yunior writes a preface that lends an epic aura to the text. The opening lines introduce “Fuku americanus,” or fuku for short, a curse that came to the Antilles when the Europeans arrived on the islands. The novel begins with these words:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. Fuku americanus, or more colloquially, fuku—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (1)

Dominican folk tradition has always included the idea of such a curse. Yunior explains, “it is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fuku on the world, and we’ve been in the shit ever since” (1). With this introduction, the fuku becomes the novel’s real antagonist.

Yunior emphasizes the real power of the fuku as a historical force when he writes: “But the fuku ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the fuku was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. . . . [I]t even had a hypeman of sorts[.] . . . Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina” (2). Since “everybody in Santo Domingo has a fuku story knocking around in their family” (5), so too: Yunior, Oscar, and Oscar’s family.

In the preface’s final paragraph, Yunior notes that one word, “Zafa,” can be used as a charm or counterspell against the fuku. It is the only “surefire counterspell that could keep you and your family safe” (7). He then goes on to wonder whether the book itself “Ain’t a zafa of sorts. [His] very own counterspell” (7). The introduction into the concept of zafa alerts us to the importance of writing Oscar’s story. By recreating Oscar’s story, Yunior, as well as the reader, is re-envisioning the curse of the diaspora and the broader American narratives represented by it.

This essay will focus on one aspect of Diaz’s symbolic representation of the fuku: the sugar cane fields of the Dominican Republic. What better place to address the curse of the diaspora, which all comes from “the same doomed, oppressive history that brought Columbus’ ships to America five hundred years ago” (Patteson 3). Much of the Dominican Republic’s traumatic history can be traced to its exportation of sugar grown in the cane fields, and to the brutality that occurred in these fields. In order to address the curse, Yunior structures the de Leon story around the Dominican cane fields that are central to the fuku and part of the Caribbean imagination.

Three climatic scenes occur in the sugar cane fields outside of Santo Domingo. These brutally violent scenes highlight—more than anything else in the novel—a significant convergence: the convergence of the history of African slavery, Spanish and French colonialism, and Dominican and US nation-making. What happens in these scenes underscores how historical and racial classifications as related to power exert devastatingly harmful effects. They all involve societal outcasts, love, people

with power, and violent beatings and serve as mini renditions or re-enactments of the fuku or curse. With the repetition of these scenes, the text shows how these harmful effects persist and get reproduced. However, by taking a close look at the description in these scenes, I wish to point out that Diaz also suggests the power in the personal reshaping of normative categories.

At this point, a brief review of the history of the cultivation of sugar cane and the island of Hispaniola will deepen our appreciation of what Diaz accomplishes in these noteworthy scenes. The history of the Dominican Republic that is documented goes back to Christopher Columbus' landing on the island on his first voyage in 1492. The indigenous people, the Taíno Amerindians, had various names for the island ("Dominican Republic History"), but Columbus renamed it La Isla Española, or Hispaniola (Flint). Initially, the Spanish colonists forced the Taino Amerindians to work in gold mines under dehumanizing conditions. This forced labor, along with the Tainos' lack of immunity to European diseases drastically reduced their population by the first decades of the sixteenth century (from about 500,000 in 1492 to 60,000 in 1508), virtually wiping them out by the century's end (Torres-Sailant and Hernández 2-3). When Christopher Columbus returned to the Americas on his second voyage, he brought sugarcane. Because of the dwindling indigenous slave supply, in 1503, the Spaniards began the importation of African slaves into the New World. According to Ashley Kunsu, "Within the first few decades of the sixteenth century, the cultivation of sugarcane became a significant enterprise on the island, and to provide the volume of labor necessary, the colonists brought greater and greater numbers of black slaves, who by 1600 outnumbered the Spanish eight to one" (214).

During these colonial times, "sugar slavery" was the critical component in what historians call The Trade Triangle, a network whereby slaves were sent to work on New World plantations, the product of their labor, sugar, was sent to Europe to be sold and European manufactured goods were brought to West Africa to purchase more slaves. The profits from the sale of the slaves were then used to buy more sugar. Profit was maximized at the expense of human lives, and sugar cane became an essential economic component in the New World (Whipps).

Although nothing in the novel takes place in Africa, Hispaniola's ties to Africa and the slave trade haunt the story in terms of the fuku and impact issues of race on the island. In the sixteenth century, the island's complicated colonial history contributed to some mixing of the races and mulattos gaining in status as the whites left for other more prosperous colonies. Their rise to power is one reason why the term black came to be used in Santo Domingo only in reference to those who were still enslaved. As Ashley Kunsu states, "The notion of blackness—at first, in opposition to it and, later, denial of it—greatly contributed to the shaping of racial categories in Santo Domingo in the coming centuries. By 1795 Spain formally ceded the western portion of the island to France" (214), which named it Saint-Domingue; it became the wealthiest and most prosperous colony in the West Indies (Nielson 259).

The slaves of plantation-based Saint Domingue, accounting for as much as ninety percent of its population, revolted against and eventually obtained their independence from the French colonial government in 1804. The new Haitian republic became the first independent nation in the Caribbean and formed itself as a "black" state.

Furthermore, while the Haitians abolished slavery on the whole island, “white elites remained in charge of politics in Santo Domingo; many of these whites and mulatto ‘whites of the land’ had lost lands to Haitian policies that were put into place on the eastern side of the island, and in 1843–44 they led the movement for an independent Dominican state. In this way, Dominican nationhood was from the first conceived in opposition to Haitian domination—that is, domination by a black state” (Kunsa 215-15). Thus, Dominicans have built barriers of prejudice and racism to distance themselves both from their own African roots and from their neighbors (Nielson 259).

When in a Dominican context, characters in Oscar Wao use the classification “Haitian” as the ultimate racial disparagement. Trujillo was known to have Haitian antecedents through his grandmother. He tried to hide his mulatto origins by lightening his skin with face powder (Derby 197), thus promoting these racist beliefs. Another interesting side note concerning Trujillo and his racial background is that for many Dominicans, Trujillo’s mystical power was attributed to his Haitian antecedents since Haiti was the center for “black magic” (Derby 210-11). In the Dominican imagination, Trujillo’s black Haitian connection gave him access to occult forces. Yunior emphasizes these powers and his darkness by equating him to fantasy villains like Darkseid and Sauron.

Beli—The Cabrals’ Family Fuku

The Cabral family claims the first sign of a fuku cursing them was that “Abelard’s third and final daughter,” Beli, was born black. According to Yunior, “not just any kind of black. But black black—kongoblack” (248). Orphaned in 1946, Beli was abandoned by her relatives because of her dark skin. For the Cabrals, the stigma of Beli’s black skin is not only the reason for her banishment but also the cause for all of the families’ tragedies (her mother’s suicide, her father’s torture and death in prison, and both of her sister’s mysterious deaths). Ashley Kunsa comments: “That blackness can be imagined in the same thought as such tragedies illustrate the degree to which opposition to it has been ingrained in the Dominican mindset” (215). Thus, one can clearly see the cyclical nature of the fuku: it is both the evidence of a curse and the cause of it.

After a terrible childhood of servitude, Beli is rescued by her father’s cousin La Inca. Beli dreams of finding a man, and after a series of heartbreaks falls in love with the Gangster, who makes her feel beautiful, wanted, and safe. “*For the first time,*” Beli says, “*I actually felt like I owned my skin, like it was me and I was it*” (127, italics in the original). Beli’s desperate love of the Gangster is what leads to the first scene in the sugar cane fields, for unbeknownst to Beli, the Gangster is married to Trujillo’s sister. When Beli becomes pregnant, the Gangster’s wife has her henchmen kidnap Beli and take her to the canefields. Thrown in the trunk of a car, Beli is driven from “the twentieth-century of the Third World” into “the rolling fields of cane” of 180 years ago. She time travels and enters an unworldly, luminous night-world. The full moonlight turns the eucalyptus leaves “into spectral coin” (146)—the description evoking a mysterious past suggesting pirates and their bounty.

The two predators march her into the “roaring” cane that is so loud it sounds as if they are “in the middle of a storm” (147). Here the daughter of the apocalypse is beaten “like she was slave. Like she was dog.” Diaz writes: “All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly” (147). Left in a “loneliness” so complete, so “total that it was beyond death, a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she’d not even had her own name” (148). At this point in the description, “slavery’s memory rears its head” “with the beating of innocent dark-skinned girls in cane fields” (Kunsa 214). Beli slides into her own personal, childhood loneliness that contains and repeats the archetypal loneliness of the unnamed who were taken to the cane fields to work, to be beaten, raped, and enslaved. Diaz writes: “she would dwell forever, alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick, pretending that the scribble was letters, words, names” (148). Here he powerfully evokes slavery’s memory with the image of the unnamed trying to communicate but having no language for the horror.

This dramatic scene conveys the historical reality of the violence but also adds poetic and mythic elements to emphasize the victim’s courage. Surviving, Beli finds “her Cabral magis,” “her anger,” and “her coraje” (courage):

Like a white light in her. Like a sun.
She came to in the ferocious moonlight. A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane.
Pain everywhere but alive. Alive. (148)

The passage references the dual images of the sun and moon, the light of Apollo, and the feminine power of the moonlight. The sun’s intense white light full of masculine energy and courage that shines within her is underscored by Diaz’s reference to “Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*.” This white sunlight reflects the moon’s “ferocious” power, just as Beli has demonstrated her ferociousness during her beating by refusing to cry or turn her face away from the blows. Like some offering, she lies atop the “broken stalks of cane” (148). From this sacred space, Diaz introduces the supernatural by reminding us: “Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?” (149).

Coming in and out of consciousness, Beli envisions a mongoose with its “golden lion eyes” (149). The mongoose recurs in all of the novel’s violent scenes and helps those lost with its ancient mythic power. A footnote relates the mongoose’s history and its place in Caribbean folklore:

Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. . . . [In] 675 B.C.E, . . . the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man. Most Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed. (151)

Beli's vision of the mongoose and its voice evoke other worlds beyond that of a civilized, modern world. This ancient folk creature sings to her and summons her out of the endless maze of cane. "She clung unsteadily to the cane, like an anciano clinging to a hammock[.] . . . Sometimes she saw the creature's chabine eyes flashing through the stalks" (150). The cane helps steady her with its dark history tied to her ancestors. It also does not want her to leave—it tries to hold onto her, to stay in this place. However, she fights to get to "her promised future—her promised children." So, "what greeted her was not cane but the open world of life" (150). She feels the tarmac under her feet, thus reaching the road out into modern life.

A passing truck of wedding singers spots Beli on the road. They see something in the road, flashing golden eyes, "something lion-like in the gloom, with eyes like terrible amber lamps" (150). This description fits both Beli and the mythical mongoose since both flash eyes of gold. Although Beli's possible connection to Trujillo frightens her rescuers, her "golden eyes of a chabine" (151), evoking deep Caribbean roots, prompt them to save her. Thus, her physical rescue comes from her connections to Caribbean folk magic. Meanwhile her Inca and "a flock of women" (144) prey fiercely through the night and lay "an A-plus zafa on the Cabral family fuku" (155), prompting her aunt to conclude that Beli was met not by "a curse but God out in the cane field" (152).

Interestingly, we find out later that on the same night of Beli's beating, Trujillo was assassinated (154). Much was afoot that evening in the Dominican Republic: a convergence of times and spiritual powers. That evening in the canefield, which stands outside of time yet also repeats it, marks a significant event in both Cabral family history and the history of the Dominican Republic. Saved, but vulnerable, Beli, now faces the same predicament the House of Cabral has always faced: "trying to decide whether to act or to stay still" (158). "The third and final daughter" (161) of the Cabral family decides to leave the island, flee the past, and move to Nuevo York, thus becoming part of the Dominican diaspora to the United States.

The Fuku Follows the Diaspora

Beli's survival and Trujillo's death are both hopeful signs; however, when Beli immigrates to the United States, she brings to the New World all of her reasons for leaving: her abusive background, her traumatic beating, and her own internalized system of racial categories. Instead of testifying to past trauma, she turns it inward. With Beli's story, Diaz suggests that immigrants from embattled countries bring with them their reasons for fleeing to the new world.

One powerful result of Beli's traumatic past is her inability to experience emotional intimacy with her children, Lola and Oscar. Raised in a household forever at war, Oscar finds solace in the comforts of late twentieth-century nerd-dom: comic books, sci-fi movies, and fantasy novels, specifically those of J.R.R. Tolkien. Growing up in Paterson, New Jersey, he differs dramatically from his culture because of his nerdiness, devotion to reading, lack of machismo, and fat body. Oscar faces questions about his heterosexuality and is called a "mariconcito" (16), a "little fag" (43), or "gordo" (17).

Beli's inability to express love also causes her children to desperately seek love—the “pure uncut unadulterated love, the Holy Grail that would so bedevil [them] throughout their lives” (125-26). Although years and miles distant from the Trujillo regime, Oscar becomes a victim of the fuku as he recklessly searches for a genuine, intimate human connection. In a provocative interview on identity theory, Diaz says that this novel “follows the quintessential american (in lowercase) narrative, which is the quest for home. Oscar is deluded or just simply doesn't realize that he's looking for a version of home, which is intimacy. But he thinks that intimacy is sex” (Okle).

The novel's structure, with its layering of the de Leon family history, underscores the family's curse and Oscar's inheritance of it. Despite the move to the United States, Oscar, the son of the diaspora, reiterates a litany of family members who are made crazy by love, especially lost love. In an interview with *Slate* magazine, Diaz said, “Oscar was the endpoint (for me) of a larger, almost invisible historical movement—he's the child of a dictatorship and of the apocalypse that is the New World. I was also trying to show how Oscar is utterly unaware of this history and yet also dominated by it” (O'Rourke).

Alienated from both Dominican and US culture, Oscar justifiably sees himself as a marginalized figure. During high school, he is subjected to the Trujillo regime in the streets of New York and New Jersey. As Yunior says: “No one, alas, more oppressive than the oppressed” (22). The dictatorial forces of Trujillo are present in a street culture fraught with hierarchies based on race, class, and gender classifications: “some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change” (264).

Even in college Oscar is not free of prevailing normative categories and feels suicidal: “The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican” (49). To complete his burial, after college Oscar returns to his old high school to teach and witnesses in this “moronic inferno” all of the gleeful sadism of his youth:

How demoralizing was that? Every day he watched the “cool” kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminio, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. In the old days it had been the white kids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color who performed the necessities. (264)

According to Elena Machado Saez, “Yunior's narration suggests that the fuku, or curse of the diaspora is to reproduce the very trauma of violence that engendered its existence” (523). Like the Cabrals before him, Oscar must decide whether to move or stay still. So, after three years of “quiet desperation” (268) teaching at the high school, he decides to go to Santo Domingo for summer vacation because my “elder spirits have been talking to me” (272). He settles into the house that the Diaspora built, turns down his cousins' offer to take him to a whore house, and falls in love with a semi-retired, neighborhood puta named Ybon Pimentel. She is described as “one of those golden mulatas that French-speaking Caribbeans call chabines, . . . she had snarled,

apocalyptic hair, copper eyes, and was one whiteskinned relative away from jaba.” Yuniór says that “Oscar considered her the start of his real life” (279).

Thirty years after Beli’s departure from the Dominican Republic, Oscar repeats many of his mother’s mistakes in his pursuit of crazy love. When Ybon, the girlfriend of el Capitan, a member of the military police, eventually rewards Oscar’s sweet love with his first real kiss, el Capitan’s flashlight beams in on their embrace. No sooner does Oscar meet “Transcendence” (294) than he finds himself thrown into the back of a car. “Where did they take him? Where else. The cane fields. How’s that for eternal return?” (296). However, Oscar does not show his mother’s bravery, but pisses in his pants and cannot stop crying. “In situations like these he had always assumed his secret hero would emerge” (297). Instead, he is paralyzed by terror and cannot “find his voice” (297). Not having a sense of identity, neither Dominican nor American, neither “machó” or “maricon,” not belonging, not fitting any normative categories, just having received his first kiss but still far from knowing real love, Oscar is powerless in the face of these embodied systems of power.

When the henchmen walk Oscar into the cane with their flashlights, he never “heard anything so loud and alien, the susurrations, the crackling, the flashes of motion underfoot (snake? mongoose?), overhead even the stars, all of them gathered in vainglorious congress” (298). The otherworldliness of the landscape, its rustling sounds, and movement are reminiscent of Beli’s experience when all of the wilderness seems alive and haunted. Indeed, Díaz tells us, “this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had an overwhelming feeling that he’d been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than *déjà vu*” (298). His experience in the canefields replicates the historical and familial dynamics of people with power violently beating outcasts.

Although the result is the same, some differences occur in the description. While the cane did not want to let Beli go, this time, the victim Oscar keeps trying to crawl back into it for protection. For Beli, the full moon illuminates the night, while for Oscar, that night’s “blackout” leads to complete blackness. Even the stars are useless. Note their description as a “vainglorious congress.” Lacking his mother’s fight, her defiance, Oscar is filled with fear and “felt impossibly alone” (298, 297). However, like his mother, Oscar survives with help from mongoose and human intervention. Clives, the taxi driver who always follows Oscar, cannot find the beaten body in the endless darkness of the cane. He hears singing and “a tremendous wind” ripping through the cane “like the first slap of a hurricane, like the blast of an angel” (300). With the help of these supernatural elements and some Haitians in a nearby batey, Clives finds Oscar and heaves him into the back of his car.

While the similarity of the two beatings is evident, neither Oscar nor his mother ever speaks of it to each other. Both victims of trauma, they remain silent. Oscar de Leon represents not only the poor dark ones of the past who worked the sugar cane fields but also their new sons who have been impacted by an American culture that both resembles and replicates the old hegemonic ways. Besides the repetition of the violence and its site, we see Oscar, the son of the diaspora who carries the history but not its corresponding brutality or mindset of machismo. A *Granta* interview with Díaz offers the following comments: “Oscar may serve as a metaphor for recovering lost Caribbean land and its troubled colonial history. Díaz says that *Oscar Wao* is ‘all about the US’, and Oscar’s

story is an American one. . . . To recover Oscar's story is to find an entangled network of relations that pulse with past actions, crimes and acts of violence" (Ch'ien 3).

As a questing, marginalized American, Oscar intrudes into the Dominican landscape and desires a relationship with an older prostitute. However, he does not proceed in the stereotypical Dominican macho way, nor in the capitalistic American way of extracting, consuming, and discarding riches. Oscar also does not fit the normative categories of race, class, or gender. Referred to as a "mutant," which has racial and homophobic implications, Oscar struggles with his identity, yet he knows from Marvel comic books that the superhero power of the X-Men comes from a genetic mutation that causes them to be considered outcasts but signals strength (pop culture references). Filled with desire, but not fully formed, Oscar possesses the mind of an artist who wants to create new worlds.

The Final Voyage into the Curse of the Caribbean

During his healing from his catastrophic injuries and like most victims of trauma, Oscar dreams "again and again of the cane, the terrible cane, except now it wasn't him at the receiving end of the beating, but his sister, his mother" (306) and he is running away. He comes to believe "that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be true" (303), that there is a "Bigger game afoot than my appearances" (306), and thus he comes to believe in the fuku.

Oscar returns to the US, and only "six weeks after the Colossal Beatdown he dream[s] about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened" (307). This dream is significant because of the word "courage." Oscar does not run from, resist, or deny, but listens to the tortuous sounds coming from "the terrible cane" (306)—the cries, the breaking of bones. No one wants to listen. No one wants to know what the cane fields contain, the histories that they hold. They serve as the Caribbean killing fields, something to be forgotten so the same crimes can be re-enacted.

When Yunion reflects back on the time when he saw Oscar after his recovery, he realizes that Oscar "looked like a man at peace with himself." He even tells Lola "that it was because [Oscar had] finally decided to live" (312), not realizing it was also more complicated than that. Oscar asks Yunion for money and secretly flies back to Santo Domingo to be with Ybon. Using his science fiction inspirations, reading *The Lord of the Rings* yet again, and remembering his sister saying "no way out but in" (209), Oscar takes his Final Voyage, only thirty pages after the first one.

As his friend Clives picks him up at the airport, he says to Oscar, "Chrisiano, . . . what are you doing here?" (315). Despite dire warnings from everyone, including Ybon, Oscar insists on remaining on the island. He returns to the origins of the new world willing to face the "Curse of the Caribbean" in order to experience love—something missing from both his life and his family's. Oscar tells Ybon, "if he could just have a week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine in him and he would be able to face what he had to face" (316). He assures her he is not going

anywhere. His family, including Yuniore, all fly to Santo Domingo to persuade him to return before he gets killed, but “something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own” (319), Yuniore reports.

During his last twenty-eight days of being in Santo Domingo, Oscar accomplishes a lot. One night at a nightclub, Oscar stares at the captain for a good ten seconds and then leaves with his “whole body shaking” (319). He writes almost three hundred pages and mails the manuscript to Yuniore, who never receives it. Nevertheless, later Yuniore does receive a letter from Oscar who sent it earlier. From this letter, we learn that Oscar and Ybon spend a weekend together while the captain is away and that Oscar has sex but that “what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex [but] the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated” (334). He ends his “Final Letter” with: “So this is what everybody’s always talking about Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335).

Oscar journeys to the homeland to claim love, to be his best self, and to face the curse with the full knowledge that the canefields await. “This time, Oscar didn’t cry when [the same brutes] drove him back into the canefields” (320). This time the cane is thick and nearing harvest: “you could hear the stalks clack-clack-clacking against each other. . . . And you could hear kriyol [creole] voices lost in the night. The smell of the ripening cane was unforgettable, and there was a moon, a beautiful full moon” (320). The natural elements, the moon, and cane are at the height of their fruition. No blackout occurs; Oscar can see, hear, and smell the landscape. Everything about this night is heightened.

Unlike the first time, the canefield is not “alien” to Oscar. The “clacking” of the cane stalks against each other is not as loud or scary as the sibilant whispering of the cane was previously with its “flashes of movement underfoot” (298) and hurricane winds. Not that it is friendly or inviting, but it is not unrecognizable. It becomes a transformative, magical space. The full moon allows Oscar to see, and he can hear the voices of the Haitian creoles lost in the night evoking memories of slavery; but he has prepared himself for this by making himself listen to these sounds, knowing that his past cries merge with these voices. By choosing to return to the island and to commit to the experience of love, he knowingly represents the dispossessed, those searching for home and self.

Previously, the Mongoose’s song facilitated Beli’s and Oscar’s escape. This time the mythic time-traveling creature does not magically appear; instead, Oscar imagines its appearance. In his “final fantasy” (320), the Mongoose is a bus driver transporting his entire family.¹ Also present on the bus is the recurring image of the Man Without a Face, who is the bus collector. This ominous image present in Oscar’s last fantasy suggests that the awareness of senseless violence has always been lurking beneath his utopian vision. In this dreamlike, yet hyperaware state, Oscar telepathically sends his love to his whole family and to Ybon.

Finally, the climactic showdown occurs. The men walk Oscar deep into the cane and turn him around while he tries to stand bravely. They exchange looks, and then Oscar starts to speak to them with “the words coming out like they belonged to someone else” (321). With these words a formal quality, a performative stance takes hold:

He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things, and if anybody knew this to be true it was him. He told them about Ybon and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they'd started to dream the same dreams and say the same words. He told them it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up), you can be.

They wait respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what fuego means in English.

Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself.

Oscar—(321-22)

A mixture of emotions and tones coexists at Oscar's death. His speech is moving and sweetly comic at the same time. His final words sound simultaneously nerdish, queer, mutant, and Christlike, like an emerging twenty-first-century American who has come of age. His last stand in the heart of the Caribbean canefields evokes science fiction, Hemingway, and the New Testament. He gestures like a superhero, takes a final stand like Hemingway's cowardly Francis Macomber (321-22),² and sacrifices himself like Jesus.

Like Christ, in the end, Oscar accepts his necessary fate, endures the sacrifice, and speaks of his love for others; that Love is what has allowed him to take this final act. His persecutors will remember him when they face their inevitable moment. They will sense him waiting on the other side. Because of Oscar's willingness to sacrifice himself for love, Yunion, like Christ's disciples, later writes Oscar's story to honor his heroism, to continue his legacy, and to try to thwart the curse. As Yunion says in the Preface, "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" against the fuku, "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (7, 1).

The novel's jacket cover picks up this idea of resurrection as well. It has a red image of Oscar's head with wings coming out of it. The image is superimposed, or rather, comes out of the novel's title. This red-winged image suggests a phoenix rising from the ashes. In the end, all of the intertwining references make quite a creole gumbo. With so many allusions—historical, literary, imaginative, visual, and biblical, Diaz throws everything that the twenty-first century has to offer at the Caribbean rubicon in the cane fields.

In his interview with Danticat, Diaz says that he "thought the book was somewhat hopeful at the end" because for him, "the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fuku—but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its

existence at a collective level. To be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations” (Danticat 3).

The critical debate surrounding the novel rests primarily on a discussion of its success at documenting resistance. Monica Hanna argues that it succeeds as “resistance history” (Hanna 516), while other critics go further by placing the novel in the “liberatory terrain” (Gonzalez 284). However, Anna Garland Mahler counters that there is no easy way out of the system of power, no way of unequivocally defeating it. She concludes that “the transparent rendering of colonist mechanisms of domination” becomes the new ethical ideal when a total victory is no longer possible (135). In a 2016 *Critique* article, Melissa Gonzalez argues that “the novel casts deep suspicion on the possibility of liberation” and “rather than envision solutions to this crisis, Wao represents its complexities” (284, 283). In a 2011 article, Ramon Saldívar argues that the novel does not presume “to resolve questions of justice, oppression, or inequality, or to effect social change.” Instead, it is an attempt to “seek radical transformation of existing social structures” via symbolic action (595).

I agree with Mahler and others that a total victory is not possible, and one important reason is that Diaz is not interested in replicating a narrative of authority that dictatorships write. Instead, with this novel, Diaz asks us to revise our relationship to history and our desire for authority. He cautions that our desire for narratives of purity, consolation, and cohesion “feed authority” (Ch’ien 4). Diaz claims that “the operating spirit of the novel” was a *bacha*, “a mythical figure in the Dominican Republic,” which is “a shape shifter with no original form, but everyone knows the *bacha*. . . . I wanted to write a shapeshifter. I wanted to see if it was possible to create a book, that, no matter how you tried to describe it, . . . suddenly the book would resist your entire description” (330-31).

With this idea in mind, Diaz returns members of the oppressed (those fighting racial, gender, and class classifications)—to the sugar cane fields three different times, each with the same locale and circumstance but each with its unique description and purpose. The first pays tribute to the historical past with Beli’s beating, suggesting countless crimes against women of color; the second shows that the denial of past traumas leads to their replication not only against people of color but also the queer, those existing outside normative classifications; and the third offers a powerful symbolic challenge against the violence. Diaz’s depiction of the confrontations in the sugar canefields offers no way of unequivocally defeating the repressive power of Trujillos or other social forms of dictatorship. Nevertheless, his imaginative transformation of these sites of contestation pays simultaneous tribute to both their indigenous origins and the resulting diasporic population.

I argue that Diaz tells a story of the Americas—of the importance of going into the canefields, historical sites of oppression, and folk power. Oscar’s action is rooted in a desire to end his family’s curse, but what we witness is someone from the diaspora interpose himself into nations with all their converging histories of racial politics, not wanting to pass on the pain or deny it. With no weapons, but his heart’s courage and his need for wholeness. He insinuates himself and his imagination into the cane fields of the apocalypse. He makes a last stand, “a posture of mind and heart” (Saldívar

595), desiring completion, desiring social belonging, not utopian aspirations, but the very human aspiration of belonging to another without ideological considerations or categorizations. It is a momentous and transformative moment. Yuniors reminds the reader of this. Although blank pages and gaps remain, Yuniors plans to give Oscar's niece Isis her uncle's writings, papers, and comic books: "And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream" (330-31).

Yuniors imagines that Isis, the "beautiful muchachita" (329), who represents "both the family's future and its legacy," will be able to take "all of that history and story and [make] it part of her own, even stronger identity" (Railton 149). Therefore Diaz, his narrator, and his novel assert the value of looking into the silence and saying what you have to say. With Yuniors's telling, Oscar's statement of personal truth enters the public realm and emerges as a transnational narrative of the twenty-first century Americas.

Notes

1. Also present on the bus is the recurring image of the Man Without a Face, who is the bus's collector. This ominous image present in Oscar's last fantasy suggests that rather than a utopian vision, Oscar knows that senseless violence always lurks.
2. The title of Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is reflected in the title of Diaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and correspondences exist between the two title characters. Macomber, a wealthy, soft American on safari with his wife, fails in his first attempt to shoot a lion; he runs instead. That night his wife sleeps with the big game hunter who kills the lion. The next day when faced with a lion again, Macomber stands his ground, not giving in to his fears, only to be shot by his wife, who aims a gun from the jeep. The title leads us to believe that during the short period of chasing the lion Macomber is more fully alive than at any time during his weak, cowardly life of cuckoldry. The same can be said for Oscar and his twenty-eight days of freedom and fulfillment in Santo Domingo, which end in his death, as opposed to his previous life of despair.

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