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The Postmodern Aesthetic of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

This thesis examines *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Díaz as an example of postmodern fiction. The thesis begins with a background chapter that outlines the central characteristics of postmodern fiction, followed by three chapters that tackle one main postmodern aspect of the novel each: fragmentation, metafiction and intertextuality. First, the novel's use of fragmentation is explored in relation to its effects on the reader and as a way of conveying the splintered lives of its characters. Second, the metafictional aspects of the novel—particularly its narration—is discussed as a way of opening up the history of the Dominican Republic for interpretation by exposing its status as a narrative construct, thereby alerting the readers to their processes of interpretation. Finally, the novel's intertextual elements are considered as a way of destabilising notions of cultural identity while simultaneously creating an amalgamation of Western and Caribbean aesthetic forms that allow for a new understanding of the identities and experiences of the Dominican diaspora. Considered together, these three aspects of the novel illustrate its dependence on a postmodern literary aesthetic in fostering critical readers and reinterpreting the history and diaspora of the Dominican Republic.

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Introduction

Junot Díaz is a contemporary American author of African heritage born in the Dominican Republic. Díaz immigrated to the US in 1974 at the age of six, spending his childhood in New Jersey. Later, he studied English and creative writing in the late eighties and early nineties when academic discourse on postmodernism was at its zenith, and entered the literary scene to much acclaim with the short-story collection *Drown* in 1995. His first novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) received numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize, a fact which consequently prompted a large amount of scholarship centered around the novel.

As an immigrant writing about the immigrant experience in contemporary US society, Díaz's writing has often been counted under the rubric of 'immigrant fiction' or 'ethnic fiction'. Scholarly criticism has centred on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'s blend of Dominican and American cultural influences, its playful narrative form and style as well as its portrayal of gender dynamics. Although the novel's unique voice and aesthetic has received its share of critical attention, there has been a tendency to single out one or two aspects of the novel such as its narration, its use of genre literature or its mix of languages. Attempts to consider the novel as an aesthetic whole are fairly few, and so far Díaz's writing have only prompted one anthology to date.¹ As a result, criticism has struggled to place the novel in a literary context, and the question of what kind of novel *Oscar Wao* is has been hard to answer. Being hard to categorize has in fact become a common way of praising the novel. As the review in the *Los Angeles Times* comments: 'It's impossible to categorize, which is a good thing ... It doesn't care about categories'.² Whether this is taken as a sign of literary quality or not, the novel's slipperiness in terms of classification poses a problem for academics. The need to categorize is not only a human inclination, but an important tool for scholars in understanding literature.

¹ Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas and José David Saldívar, editors. *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*. Duke University Press, 2016.

² Susan Straight. 'Review of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Los Angeles Times*, articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/09/books/bk-straight9. Accessed 22 Feb. 2017.

In recent years, postmodernism has started to go out of fashion in academia and popular culture. As a consequence, debates on the status of postmodernism and its possible successors such as post-postmodernism, metamodernism and hypermodernism have followed. It seems we are currently entering a new cultural era, supposedly with new literary aesthetics and forms as a result. Despite the downward trend of postmodernism, however, there are still several esteemed contemporary authors who are considered postmodernists—Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon to mention a few—and so postmodern fiction is still very much alive and influential in the 21st century. And if postmodernism is dying, surely whatever comes next must contend with the legacy of postmodernism just as postmodernism did with modernism.

Díaz is not usually included in lists of postmodern authors, yet his first novel displays many postmodern characteristics such as fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and a large array of intertextual references. Because of its abundance of postmodern characteristics, this thesis will analyze the novel as a postmodern piece of fiction in an effort to see to what extent it can be seen as postmodern and how such a reading might benefit or detract from the novel. Taking *Oscar Wao*'s resistance of classification as a challenge, then, might offer new insights into the novel itself and illuminate the connections between its formal and aesthetic aspects and its depiction of identity.

Beginning with a background chapter offering an overview of postmodernism and what constitutes a postmodern novel, the thesis goes on to examine *Oscar Wao* by grouping its primary postmodern characteristics into three chapters and analyzing them in turn to see what function they have. The first chapter will consider the various ways the novel employs fragmentation as a narrative structure, temporally, geographically, and thematically, to order the immigrant experience and its entailing splintering of identity. The second chapter will look at the novel's narration, namely how the narrator's metafictional style draws attention to the frame of narration, thereby prompting the readers to consider how historical narratives are constructed. The third chapter will examine the novel's use of intertextuality, analyzing how Díaz's irreverent mix of cultural references encourages readers to become aware of how they are complicit in marginalisation. This chapter will also examine how the blend of

intertextual elements function as a lens through which to view the experience of Dominican immigrants in the United States. Ultimately, the postmodern aesthetic of *Oscar Wao* not only functions as a way to convey the experiences of the Dominican diaspora, but to make readers aware of how grand narratives—particularly those of cultural identity and history in the Dominican Republic—are constructed.

Background

Before examining *Oscar Wao* and how its postmodern aesthetic functions, one needs to understand what postmodern fiction is and how it functions in general. As a phenomenon, postmodernism is and has been infamously hard to define. Because of this, I will narrow down the discussion to postmodern *fiction* in particular and not postmodernity or postmodernism in general after the difference between these three terms are made clear. Brian Nicol makes the distinction thus:

“Postmodern” is an adjective that refers both to a particular period in literary and perhaps cultural history ... which begins in the 1950s and continues until the 1990s (though, inevitably there is disagreement about this too, as some would argue we are still in the postmodern period now), and to a set of aesthetic styles and principles which characterize literary production in this period and which are shaped by the context of postmodernism and postmodernity. Where “postmodernity” refers to the way the world has changed in this period, due to developments in the political, social, economic, and media spheres, “postmodernism” (and the related adjective “postmodernist”) refers to a set of ideas developed from philosophy and theory and related to aesthetic production.³

For the purposes of this thesis, I want to focus on the ‘set of aesthetic styles and principles which characterize literary production’ and how they function in *Oscar Wao*, not how they came to arise or whether or not they are still the prevailing styles and principles of contemporary cultural production. Although this thesis can be read as an implicit argument for the relevance of understanding contemporary fiction such as *Oscar Wao* through a postmodern lens, that is a discussion I will leave to others. It is also crucial here to make clear the distinction between postmodernism as a literary aesthetic and postmodernism as literary theory since theory is often seen as integral to postmodernism. Put simply, the postmodern aesthetic consists of various stylistic and

³ Brian Nicol. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 2.

formal features and principles that theory seeks to describe and analyze, yet theory is also much broader and goes outside of literature to look at postmodernism as a whole.

Moving on to the definition of postmodern fiction, Nicol argues that it is not a 'historical label like "Victorian fiction"', and that it is 'far too diverse in style to be a genre' (Nicol xvi). Instead, Nicol views postmodern fiction as 'a particular "aesthetic"—a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century' (Nicol xvi). To help define this aesthetic, Nicol borrows Brian McHale's approach to defining postmodern fiction which uses the concept of 'the dominant'—in turn borrowed from Roman Jakobson—meaning 'the focusing component of a work of art' which changes through literary history and 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components and guarantees "the integrity" of the structure'.⁴ Ascertaining whether or not a text is postmodern, then, becomes a matter of determining which of its elements are particularly dominant. In Nicol's view, the features that are most important to postmodern fiction are:

- (1) a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as constructed, aesthetic artefact
- (2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'
- (3) a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text (Nicol xvi)

As Nicol points out, none of these features are exclusive to postmodernism, however, which is why the concept of the dominant is crucial. It is a question of to what degree these features are present that determines whether or not one can consider the text postmodern. To help understand these three features in more detail as well as how they relate to *Oscar Wao*, I would now like to turn to the theories of Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, perhaps the two most influential scholars on postmodern fiction.

⁴ Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Methuen, 1987, p. 6.

McHale argues that postmodern fiction essentially confronts the problems and inconsistencies of creating fictional worlds. The creation of fictional worlds is integral to all fiction, but whereas most kinds of fiction usually ignore or conceal their problems and inconsistencies, postmodern fiction exposes them. To explain his view of postmodern fiction, McHale uses a comparison between modernism and postmodernism which relies on 'the dominant' as previously mentioned. The dominant of modernism, McHale argues, is epistemological, or to do with knowing, whereas postmodern fiction's dominant is ontological, or concerned with being. Modernist texts prompt us to ask epistemological questions of the text ('How can I know and interpret this world?') while postmodern texts typically encourage us to ask ontological questions about the world of the text ('What kind of world is this text creating?'):

[P]ostmodernist fictions deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale 10)

Nicol points out that McHale's 'choice of terms ... can be slightly misleading' as there are serious philosophical debates surrounding them which McHale seems unaware of (Nicol 34). McHale's theory is not really interested in philosophical inquiry, however. Instead, the essential question that follows from his theory is what a text invites us to do and what sorts of interpretive solutions are available to us as we read a text.

Applied to *Oscar Wao*, McHale's system of characterizing postmodern fiction as a phenomenon which inherently foregrounds ontological questions and concerns seems to fit the novel well as it shifts back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the

US, from the “Third World” to the “First World”, between different time periods and between different characters and narrators, all of them inhabiting their own worlds or ways of being. It is clear that the ostracized protagonist Oscar lives in a very different world than the perennial ladies man Yunior, for example, and the novel continuously prompts us to ask questions about how it can be that they experience the world so differently. Additionally, Díaz’s spare use of magical realism as well as his blending of history with science fiction and fantasy in his constructing the Dominican Republic as a Mordor of sorts also forces us to ask what kind of world we are reading about.

McHale points to the historical novel as an excellent example of violating ontological boundaries as it usually fictionalises the lives of real people. Traditional historical novels ‘suppress these violations’, however, ‘to hide the ontological “seams” between fictional projections and real-world facts’ by ‘avoiding contradictions between their versions of historical figures and the familiar facts of these figures careers, and by making the background norms governing their projected worlds conform to projected real-world norms’ (McHale 16-17). *Oscar Wao* tells the story of the rise and fall of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo and his various associates, chronicling much of the history of the Dominican Republic in the process, yet the way the story is told through footnotes and by a self-conscious narrator highlights the so called ‘ontological violation’ of including history in literature since history, too, is a narrative shaped by a storyteller.

The use of history in literature is especially important to Linda Hutcheon who views postmodern fiction as ‘fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political’.⁵ By contradictory she does not mean that postmodern fiction is oppositional or dialectical like the fiction of previous literary periods but that it is fundamentally double. In other words, postmodern fiction often does two opposing things at once, presenting both sides of the argument simultaneously so to speak. The most important way that postmodern fiction evinces this doubleness, according to Hutcheon, is in its combination of self-reflexivity with history into what she terms ‘historiographic metafiction’. Historiographic metafiction displays the doubleness of

⁵ Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 2000, p. 4.

postmodern fiction by simultaneously presenting us with a vivid and believable history, as in Yunior's story of the Trujillo era, yet simultaneously undermining that same presentation by alerting us to its nature as a construct, as Yunior so often does.

The combination of the historical with self-reflexiveness is not something new to postmodernism, of course. However, the doubleness of postmodernism is different from that of previous periods, Hutcheon argues, because of its 'constant attendant irony of the context of the postmodern version of these contradictions and also their obsessively recurring presence' (Hutcheon x-xi). Put simply, historiographic metafiction is suffused with frequent ironic contradictions to a much greater extent than the fiction that came before it. As with McHale's use of the dominant, Hutcheon's definition of postmodern fiction is a question of to what degree certain aspects are present.

The contradictory combination of historical fact and self-reflexive fiction is also similar to McHale's notion of crossing ontological boundaries, but Hutcheon takes the idea of the worlds of the text and real life colliding further. Metafiction usually challenges traditional realist modes of representation by foregrounding its own nature as a construct in order to remind us that real life, too, is constructed or mediated in some way. Historiographical metafiction, by extension, seeks to remind us that history is also similarly constructed. 'History is not "the past", but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past', as Nicol puts it (99). As a result of postmodern fiction's unique combination of history and self-reflexivity, historiographic metafiction also displays a doubleness towards the reader. In the case of *Oscar Wao*, we are both taught the real history of the Dominican Republic yet consistently prompted to question and interpret the narrative Yunior presents to us. *Oscar Wao* thus problematises the differences between fiction and reality, encouraging the reader to investigate the space between. In this sense, Hutcheon's theory argues that postmodern fiction is inherently political as it exposes history as a construct. As a consequence, the reader is made wary of what Jean-Francois Lyotard called grand narratives, any supposedly comprehensive and all-encompassing explanations of historical experience or knowledge, 'those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit', as Hutcheon puts it (Hutcheon x).

This is an important feature of Hutcheon's theory that sets it apart from McHale: whereas McHale is only interested in the workings of literature as separated from society, Hutcheon is concerned with fiction's political potential. She wants to show how postmodern fiction undermines notions of truth as stable or universal, claiming that 'there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth' (Hutcheon 109). Similarly, Nicol points out that the value of writing and reading historiographical metafiction is not to completely undermine the validity of historiography, however, but to "open ... up" to interpretation what would otherwise be a closed, didactic form of rhetoric' which then prevents history from being conclusive and teleological (104).

Inherent to Hutcheon's idea of postmodern fiction exposing the constructed nature of knowledge, moreover, is that it also exposes the nature of skewed power relations. As Hutcheon puts it: 'what I have been calling postmodern fiction does not "aspire to tell the truth" (Foley 1986a, 26) as much as to question *whose* truth gets told' (Hutcheon 122-123). Hutcheon's theory thus works well together with postcolonial theory as they share the political goals of subverting the dominant discourse of power by exposing their constructed nature. The postmodern aesthetic of *Oscar Wao*, then, also undermines the dominant discourse, not only by dramatizing the lives of historically marginalized people and taking as one of its main themes the way Trujillo's regime suppresses the stories of these people, but by exposing the constructed nature of discourse and power itself.

Furthermore, Hutcheon's notion of doubleness and its consequential scepticism towards totalising narratives can also be seen in the prevailing irony of postmodern fiction. Irony, in the narrower verbal sense—meaning one thing and saying another—as opposed to situational or dramatic irony, exemplifies Hutcheon's notion of the doubleness of postmodern fiction. Historiographic metafiction is a good example of irony, then, since it both presents readers with a believable history and simultaneously undermines it by forcing them to look at its constructed nature. Irony is not cynical and hopeless as it sometimes seems, however, but it displays what Nicol calls 'a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed' since the speaker must have knowledge about the double meaning of words (Nicol, 13). In Hutcheon's view, irony

thus becomes another tool to take apart the grand narratives of society and open them up for critique and interpretation.

Lastly, postmodern fiction's foregrounding of its own fictionality has an important consequence for whomever reads it. Whether they like it or not, reading self-conscious fiction results in self-conscious readers who are aware of their own processes of interpretation. Readers of postmodern fiction are repeatedly prevented from 'passively entering the fictional world' by constant reminders that 'it *is* a fictional world' (Nicol 39). Nicol goes so far as to suggest that the way writers deal with fictional worlds might 'teach us something about the real world', echoing Hutcheon's idea of postmodern fiction's political potential (Nicol 40). Considered in relation to *Oscar Wao*, the idea of postmodern fiction fostering a more engaged and perhaps critical reader can be seen in the way Yunior addresses the reader, the internal references to writing the novel itself, the use of footnotes reminding us that someone edited the novel, and so on. These features prompt readers to consider their act of reading and forces them to see the novel as a work of fiction which has been crafted with a purpose in mind. Thematically, this way of encouraging the reader to be self-aware and critical about texts is linked to the novel's critique of discourse and power, namely the way the Trujillato subjugated the Dominican Republic through not only physical terror but propaganda and myth. As will be argued, the postmodern aesthetic of *Oscar Wao* is integral to cultivating a critical reader, and perhaps a more engaged and critical citizen as well. As the literary critic Paula M. L. Moya puts it: 'Literature by itself will never change the world ... But it nevertheless remains a highly powerful tool, and an important actor, in the ongoing struggle to imagine, as the Mexican poet and novelist Rosario Castellanos says, another way to be human and free'.⁶

⁶ Paula M. L. Moya. *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 165.

Fragmentation: Unmaking Myth, Mediating Experience

Fragmentation is a central technique in postmodern fiction, and *Oscar Wao* is an excellent example of it. It is, however, a very broad concept and thus the use of it takes many forms, or rather, many ways of breaking up and disrupting forms. In this chapter I will use the term to mean the breaking apart of the pieces that usually form a coherent narrative whole such as a consistent setting, a linear time-line and one main character, but also the visual and structural fracturing of the text into separate pieces such as footnotes and subchapters. Fragmentation is also a thematic feature in the sense that a novel treats the splintering of the characters' identities as a theme.

Fragmentation is not a concept which is new to postmodern literature; it was also a central device in modernist writing. The difference between postmodern fiction's use of fragmentation and its modernist counterpart, however, is that its postmodern implementation does not ultimately resolve itself in a hidden mythical structure buried in the text like in the classics of modernism such as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Ulysses* (1922). In *The Waste Land*, for instance, the poem's seemingly fragmented chaos follows the pattern of the myth of the fisher king and various vegetation rituals inspired by *The Golden Bough* (1890), a study of comparative religion that illustrated the many mythical similarities between religions across the world; and *Ulysses*, despite its formal and stylistic fragmentation, adheres to the structure and themes of *The Odyssey* which gives the novel a vast, hidden layer of coherence and meaning.

In contrast to these modernist examples, fragmentation, as it has been used in postmodern fiction, tends to eschew any ultimate sense of structure. Instead, fragmentation is embraced as a means of resisting grand narratives and totalising interpretations. In other words, it rejects the myths that modernism used as its groundwork, while simultaneously evincing a self-conscious playfulness that compels the reader to approach the text as a fractured construct asking to be put together. If modernist writing is a puzzle that reveals a coherent picture once put together properly, the puzzle of postmodern writing only offers the reader an image of more chaos.

Oscar Wao uses postmodern fragmentation both structurally and thematically. In terms of structure, the novel consists of eight larger chapters splintered into a myriad of

subchapters, sometimes numbering as many as twenty-two per chapter. The text is further fractured by various epilogues, epigraphs and footnotes which break up any formal unity. Moreover, the formal fragmentation mimics the novel's treatment of fragmentation as a theme. The novel dramatises the fractured histories of its characters by constantly shifting its setting, both in time and place, and also which character is made the focus of the story. The thematic fragmentation serves to capture the fragmented identities and realities of the novel's characters as they all belong to several ethnicities, cultures and nations at once. Taken together, these two kinds of fragmentation work, on the one hand, to create a postmodern aesthetic which subverts the grand narratives of white supremacy and patriarchy as well as, on the other hand, creating a more informed, engaged and critical reader. As I hope to make clear, *Oscar Wao*'s fragmentation is uniquely postmodern in that it fulfils all three of Nicol's criteria of postmodern fiction: the novel self-reflexively displays its status as a construct by the playful brevity of its subchapters and its mix of narrative styles, it implicitly critiques a realist approach by its shifts in point of view and its non-linear arrangement, and it 'draws the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation' through its use of footnotes and its fragmented subchapters (Nicol xvi).

Beginning with the novel's use of formal fragmentation, perhaps the most immediately apparent way this can be seen is in the novel's numerous subchapters. *Oscar Wao* is divided into three larger sections marked with roman numerals, eight main chapters marked with Arabic numbers and seventy named but unnumbered subchapters. Additionally, the novel contains three epigraphs, three prologues and two epilogues, all of which creates the resemblance of a patchwork of smaller texts rather than one flowing, coherent whole.⁷ By being divided into pieces, the novel resists attempts at regarding it as a traditional story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Nicol points out that postmodern fiction typically objects to the notion 'that the story it tells is "natural" and "singular", a matter of the narrator simply *mediating* an "existing" story' that reflects the real world in a "realistic" way (Nicol 24). Fragmentation

⁷ See the appendix for a detailed overview of the novel's structure.

necessarily disrupts the idea of a single story and foregrounds the fact that someone has put the story together from disparate pieces, highlighting its constructed nature.

As mentioned above, the proliferation of subchapters is one of the principal ways the novel employs fragmentation, occasionally switching subchapter twice on a single page. The short subchapters can sometimes function as a way for the narrator to playfully comment on the story, as for instance in the subchapter 'In My Humble Opinion'. After having described two slightly different versions of an event when Abelard, Oscar's grandfather, has a confrontation with Trujillo's secret police and possibly makes a joke—something that 'is still, to this day, hotly disputed'⁸—Yunior inserts this two-sentence subchapter: 'It sounds like the most unlikely load of jirigonza⁹ on this side of the Sierra Madre. But one man's jirigonza is another man's life' (*Wao* 244). Besides the fact that Yunior explicitly raises concerns about the veracity of the story and clearly states that this is *his* humble opinion, the chapter's brevity flaunts the fact that the novel is constructed by a playfully subversive narrator. The readers are thus constantly made aware of the fact that they are reading a work of fiction that has been heavily coloured by the narrator's point of view. Just as the narrator explicitly comments on the foregoing story and alerts readers to its probable falsity, the form of the subchapters do the same.

Further subverting any sense of unity is the inconsistency with which the fragmentation is employed. Some chapters have dates, others do not; some chapters use subchapters, others do not; some chapters are very long, others are extremely short. The same is true for the novel's three main sections which vary significantly in length, going from approximately 200 pages in the first section, to 100 in the second section to only 25 in the final section. There is also a lack of consistency in the narration: the first chapter is narrated by Yunior, but the second is mainly narrated by Oscar's sister Lola apart from the brief introduction to the chapter in second person which is narrated by Yunior, shifting both from first-person to second-person and from one narrator to

⁸ Junot Díaz. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, 2008, p. 243.

⁹ 'The word is jirigonza not jiri- is a language or communication hard to interpret as it is phrased in a somewhat modified vocabulary like lotsa slang or argot, often used to keep a conversation very private'. <http://www.annotated-oscar-wao.com/chapter3.html>. Accessed 27 Dec. 2017.

another. Unlike the chapter that came before it, Lola's chapter does not have any subchapters, but proceeds in an almost unbroken stream of first-person narration, in marked contrast to the third-person which most of the book is narrated in. The second prologue, however, is once again narrated by Lola, and a few other characters narrate shorter subchapters. This inconsistency and inexorable change reflects the flux of the lives of the characters, at the same time that it also demands that the reader be an active and alert participant in the story, thus keeping the reader on his or her toes, so to speak.

Moreover, the prominent use of footnotes breaks the text into two levels. As with the brevity of the subchapters, the footnotes display in an almost ostentatious way the fictitious nature of the novel.¹⁰ In terms of formal fragmentation, the footnotes fracture the narrative both in terms of its appearance on the page, creating an incoherent impression, and in terms of the type of text we are reading such as a real historical account of the Dominican Republic or a fictional account of one of the novel's characters or a lengthy quote from *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). The footnotes sometimes offer background information on the characters, sometimes an explanation of a Dominican expression, and sometimes they are simply narratorial comments; but they mainly provide the reader with a history of the Dominican Republic, starting from the days Columbus landed on the island, and going on to Trujillo's regime and beyond.¹¹ The readers can therefore go from reading about Oscar's struggles to the history of the Dominican Republic in a very brief span of text, as in chapter 1 where Oscar's initial childhood success with girls prompts his mother to compare him to 'Porfirio Rubirosa' (12). Here, a footnote gives the uninformed reader a long explanation of who Rubirosa was and his significance to the Dominican Republic. Footnotes such as this one ask the readers to interrupt the reading process and jump between layers in the text to an entirely different kind of writing, from a blatantly fictional form dealing with the life of one historically unimportant character to a purportedly factual—although undoubtedly embellished—one informing us about a historical person. Sometimes readers even have

¹⁰ The metafictional nature of this device will be discussed further in the next chapter.

¹¹ See the appendix of Sean P. O'Brien's 'Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, pp. 75-94 for a table categorising all of the novel's footnotes in detail.

to jump ahead in the text since some footnotes continue for more than a page (this is for example the case with the footnote on pages 233-234).

The back and forth movement created by the footnotes mimics the novel's other back and forth movements such as its travel back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the United States, the movement back and forth in time, as well as back and forth between main characters and even back and forth between different languages (English, Spanish), registers (slang, formal academic language) and "high" and "low" forms of cultural references (poetry, comic books). The back and forth movements thus encapsulate the central notion of fragmentation in *Oscar Wao* as a continuous movement between two poles, two identities or ways of being, while never being able to stop in the space in between the two or combining them in any way. Fragmentation, as I have been describing it so far, thus mimics the state of being that the characters—particularly Oscar, Lola and Yunior—experience in not being able to rest comfortably in a coherent and whole identity. The restless movement, furthermore, constantly worries the reader and disrupts the flow and coherence usually experienced while reading a traditional realist novel with a coherent style and few if any jumps in time or character. As a result, the back and forth created by the footnotes and the other forms of fragmentation undermine the stability and unity of the novel, imbuing it with a resistance to grand narratives. Before discussing how the fragmentation relates to the themes of the novel hinted at above, I would like to further discuss the question of how the fragmentation affects the reader, and how exactly the novel's fragmentation works against the concept of grand narratives.

Nicol claims that postmodern fiction is especially challenging 'because it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer' (Nicol xiv). As was discussed above, the constant movement back and forth between different styles, languages and kinds of texts places the onus on the reader to make sense of the text. Naturally, the reader is always required to make sense of a text no matter how traditional or avant garde it may be; the crucial difference in the case of *Oscar Wao*, however, is that the reader is required, or rather prompted by the novel, to

do extra work in the form of tying the pieces together to a much greater degree than, for example, a traditional realist text.

I have previously mentioned that the novel also fosters a more critical reader. What I mean by this is that the text, through the formal devices discussed above, prompts the reader to ask critical questions such as: ‘Can I trust this narrator?’, ‘How might the narrator have altered the story to fit his purpose, and what might that purpose be?’, ‘How has the beliefs of the people living in the Dominican Republic been affected by Trujillo’s propaganda and mythmaking?’, ‘How is the oppression that the characters in the novel suffer connected to the stories told by the Trujillato?’ Essentially, the questions all relate to stories in the form of propaganda, the cultural stories or beliefs (grand narratives) told and held by the people in the novel, and the ways the storyteller affects the story. As a result of the fragmentation and the questions it prompts the readers to ask, they are imbued with a sceptical attitude that Christopher Butler sees as central to postmodern theory.¹²

Butler identifies Lyotard as having made the central connection between postmodern fiction and a sceptical attitude. Lyotard argues that ‘master narratives’ are in decline in the postmodern era. Master narratives ‘are contained in or implied by major philosophies ... which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity’ (Lyotard quoted in Butler 13). ‘Simplifying to the extreme’, Lyotard explains, ‘I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard quoted in Butler 13). This Lyotardian incredulity is fostered in the reader through the many narratorial winks to the reader as well as the narrator’s exposé and critique of the Trujillo regime. The Trujillato is often described as exercising its power through propaganda and myth such as the fukú—the curse that plagues the Dominican diaspora—itsself: ‘No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*’ (*Wao* 2). Master narratives, according to Butler, ‘traditionally serve to give cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority’, and this is precisely the case with the Trujillato (13). Yunior’s historical exposé coupled

¹² Christopher Butler. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 13.

with the narrative form render these master narratives impotent; and by extent one can extend this critical postmodern attitude to the master narratives that haunt and oppress the characters away from the Dominican Republic, too, in particular those of white supremacy and patriarchy.¹³

Incidentally, this also shows how relevant master narratives and a critical attitude towards them still is, and by extent, how relevant postmodern writing and thinking is as well. The master narratives of patriarchy and white supremacy are very much alive and well in the novel and in the societies it describes, and a critical attitude is crucial in defeating them. Therefore, postmodern writing and the sceptical attitude it fosters are still needed. Butler points out that Lyotard based his notion of the decline of master narratives on a small cultural elite when in fact the ‘general *sociological* claim that such narratives are in decline in our period looks pretty thin ... because allegiances to larger-scale, totalizing religious and nationalist beliefs are currently responsible for so much repression, violence, and war’ (Butler 14).

Furthermore, Butler contends that postmodern writers

responded to [the view of resisting consensus], partly for the good reason that by doing so they could side with those who didn’t “fit” into the larger stories – the subordinated and the marginalized – against those with the power to disseminate the master narratives. (Butler 15)

While the above quotation supposes that all postmodern writers fit into ‘the larger stories’—that they are generally white and male—Díaz, being an immigrant of colour, does not. Nevertheless, *Oscar Wao* dramatises the move of siding with the marginalised who have no place in the larger stories by making the subordinated and the marginalised the main characters of the story while the Trujillato and its attendant master narratives of white supremacy and patriarchy are relegated to the margins in the footnotes. The impact of these master narratives, however, permeate the story and is most clearly reflected in the lives of its characters to which I now turn.

¹³ White supremacy and patriarchy can be understood as master narratives since they ‘serve to give cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority’ (Butler 13).

The novel uses fragmentation as a theme primarily by the way the characters suffer through the splintering of their identities by being marginalised and having to combine disparate strands into a coherent identity. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on Oscar and Yunior who emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States early in life and thus were forced to merge different nations into their identities as they grow up. In addition to their shared backgrounds as Dominicans they share an African heritage and a working class background. Furthermore, Oscar and Yunior both have an interest in science fiction, fantasy and writing. Taken together, the different axes of identity which converge in these characters are hardly traditional. As a result, not fitting into different social groups' ideas of how one should look and behave leads to hardship for both of them. The social ideas of how race, ethnicity and gender are supposed to work are precisely the grand narratives Lyotard claimed were in decline, and so while the form of the novel asks us to be critical of these grand narratives, the content of *Oscar Wao* gives us examples of how factually incorrect they can be as well as how pernicious they are. The norms of masculinity affect Oscar and Yunior in particular, which is why the rest of this chapter will focus on them.

Oscar is perhaps the one who struggles the most with aligning his identity with the expectations of those around him. He has to contend with being not only a Dominican immigrant, but also of African heritage, and of a working class background. He is also fat in a society which loathes fatness, and interested in traditionally nerdy and therefore “white” and non-working class pastimes like fantasy, sci-fi and writing. All of these facts of his person works against each other so that he is not seen as fully black, fully male, fully Dominican, part of his socio-economic background or normal-bodied. In other words, Oscar is seen as an Other, as someone not fully human. Being so thoroughly excluded, it is no surprise that he is consistently described by what he is not:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude

never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him).
(11)

As is made clear above, Oscar is held to the machismo standards of the Dominican Republic and consistently defined by the ways he fails to be a “real Dominican man”. He is furthermore described as having

none of the Higher Powers of the typical Dominican male, couldn’t have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. (20-21)

As the quotation illustrates, Oscar is constructed against the stereotype of the “real Dominican man”, lacking ‘the Higher Powers’ of his seemingly superhero-like peers. After his early success with girls, puberty transforms Oscar into an overweight nerd shunned by the opposite sex; he is ‘bloated, dyspeptic, and, most cruelly, alone in his lack of girlfriend’ (29). After he discovers that his two best friends are embarrassed to be seen with him when there are girls around, Oscar examines himself in the mirror:

The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernández’s Palomar. Jesus Christ, he whispered. I’m a Morlock. (30)

The narrator associating Oscar with comic book figures and Oscar likening himself to a Morlock—the degenerate, subterranean human monsters of *The Time Machine* (1895)—associates him with genre literature and monsters, symbolising his marginalised social position. ‘Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens’, Yunior explains further, ‘Couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d

wanted to' (22). Oscar is portrayed as a subhuman Other while his peers—Yunior especially—have the 'Higher Powers' Oscar lacks.

Notably, despite his supposed monstrosity Oscar is 'Our hero', and it is the example of Oscar's struggle to find love and acceptance that, together with the journey of Yunior, form the basis of the novel's critique of the grand narratives of patriarchy, white supremacy and of all cultural norms affecting these characters (*Wao* 11). Oscar personifies marginalisation in many of its forms, as has been described. In fact, he can be read as a perpetual Other of sorts:

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. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. (51)

Recalling the fragmentation and instability of the back-and-forth movement the novel enacts in its journeys between nations, languages and types of texts, the passage quoted above illustrates how Oscar himself exists in a state of "neither-nor": he can be recognized as neither a white kid or of one of colour. In fact, he is continually constructed as the Other depending on the social group viewing him, making him a constant Other. Not only does the back-and-forth between identities and social groups illustrate how socially constructed these aspects of identity (being black, nerdy and so on) are, but it also shows how harmful fragmentation of one's identity in the sense of not fitting neatly into social categories is.

What sets Oscar and Yunior apart from each other, despite their many commonalities, is how differently they express and deal with the ideal of masculinity. As has been established, Oscar is characterised as hypomasculine while Yunior is hypermasculine. Oscar and Yunior are thus foils for each other, Yunior being the perfect image of Dominican hypermasculinity, able to press 340 lbs, always getting girls, never staying faithful, interested in sex but not in intimacy and never showing

much emotion beyond anger. In contrast, Oscar is able to befriend girls, is never violent, is overly emotional, fat, weak, and interested in genuine intimacy. Oscar and Yunior thus represent two masculinities, Yunior standing in for traditional Dominican masculinity while Oscar represents the alternate, more positive one Yunior eventually changes towards.

Thanks in part to their friendship, Yunior undergoes some change in how he handles his masculinity. The hardships Yunior has dealt with in life seem connected to his masculinity which cuts him off from the love and intimacy of others: 'A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things' (192). Towards the end of the book, however, Yunior acknowledges Oscar's influence on him, claiming he is now a new man who has (mostly) stopped chasing women, started writing and is steadily married. He regretfully mentions that he could have had Lola and her daughter: 'Could have been my daughter if I'd been smart, if I'd been ——' (349). The blank space is left for the reader to fill in, and since Yunior has lost the opportunity to create a life with Lola due to his traditional masculinity it seems plausible that the blank could be filled with 'there', 'present' or something to that effect. We are left with the sense that if Yunior had been a little more like Oscar, embracing his alternate masculinity, his life could have been more fulfilling and he could have attained the love he has sought but never managed to keep throughout the novel.¹⁴

Furthermore, Oscar's alternate masculinity is related to his writing. This is significant since writing is where Yunior takes the baton from Oscar. Yunior persistently describes how often Oscar writes and what he writes about, illustrating Yunior's interest. He even admires some of Oscar's work: 'Picked up his writings, five books to date, and tried to read some ... even I could tell he had chops. Could write dialogue, crack snappy exposition, keep the narrative moving' (155). The act of writing and reflecting, furthermore, is seen as one of the most powerful ways of creating change, something Yunior seems to realise towards the end of the book, hence leading to the creation of *Oscar Wao* itself. Writing is a talent ascribed in the novel only to

¹⁴ Yunior's troubled quest for love is continued and expanded upon in the collection of short stories *This is How You Lose Her* (2012).

dictators and those who are in a position to oppose dictators. In a footnote, Yuniór ponders:

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? ... Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (97)

Despite being at opposite ends on the masculinity spectrum, Oscar and Trujillo have the same power. Trujillo represents the extreme of traditional Dominican masculinity in the text, as he is described as the ultimate machismo Dominican, having teams to scout for his next woman (217). He is almost comically evil, and so hypermasculinity becomes a villainous trait by association. Hypermasculinity is also what eventually causes Oscar's death and the hardships of the de Leon family including the sexual violence directed toward the female family members. In this sense, Dominican machismo becomes the fukú, the curse haunting the family and the Dominican Republic itself—it is the invisible social system that cannot be escaped. If one sees the fukú as partly or mostly consisting of hypermasculinity, the zafa—the counterspell to the fukú—of writing the novel which Yuniór has taken up therefore becomes an attempt at combatting that masculinity.

Considered in the context of a novel that encourages its readers to be wary of how texts are constructed highlights how the fragmented form of the novel supports how its content undermines the myth of hypermasculinity. By using fragmentation not only as a formal principle, but a thematic one, the novel undermines the grand narratives surrounding masculinity in the Dominican Republic and the United States, and reflects the fractured lives of its characters. The novel's use of fragmentation, moreover, is essentially postmodern in several regards: it prompts the readers to see the text as a construct, thereby giving them insight into how texts can influence readers for both good and bad; it therefore also makes the readers examine their own process of

interpretation; and finally, it implicitly critiques the concept of realism by utilising its fragmented structure as a reflection of the realities of its central characters. The difference between reality and fiction, which Díaz blurs in order to further undermine the grand narratives of patriarchy, white supremacy and the history that has been written in support of them, is something I will turn to in the next chapter.

‘Writing into Silence’: Metafiction and the Gaps of History

Patricia Waugh, author of the seminal work *Metafiction* (1984), defines metafiction as ‘a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’.¹⁵ Put simply, the lowest common denominator of metafiction, according to Waugh, is ‘to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction’ (6). Similar to how fragmentation is not something new to postmodern writing, metafiction has been a feature of the novel from the very start with *Don Quijote* (1605) and has had its periods of prominence throughout literary history (Waugh 5). What makes postmodern metafiction different is the prevalence and degree to which it is implemented. Whereas previous iterations of metafiction have certainly raised questions of fiction and reality, postmodern metafiction interrogates that relationship with a systematic perseverance not seen before; and the sheer number of works of metafiction from the 1960s and onward confirm metafiction as a key component of postmodern fiction. Metafiction has therefore come to be regarded as ‘the main technical device used in postmodern fiction’ (Nicol 35).

The relationship between history and metafiction in *Oscar Wao* is characterised by a postmodern doubleness: the novel simultaneously re-tells the history of the Dominican Republic while undermining its re-telling. Metafiction, by exposing the frames of fiction, thus invites the reader to think about how stories are constructed. The critical mindset cultivated by the novel’s metafictional devices is then applied to the question of historiography. By blending history and fiction, coupled with the novel’s use of metafiction, the novel suggests that history is not a simple matter of retelling what happened in the past, but a question of whose history gets told and why. *Oscar Wao* thus uses metafiction to open up official Dominican history to reveal its countless lacunae, its *páginas en blanco*, left in the slipstream of the Trujillo regime as well as the earlier terrors inflicted on the Caribbean by the Spanish. The gaps of the country’s official history are filled—or at least made smaller—by the voices of those marginalized

¹⁵ Patricia Waugh. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Routledge, 1990, 2.

in that same history: the poor, the dark-skinned. However, the fact that it is told by a dictatorial but captivating narrator problematises the novel's approach of telling the story of the Dominican Republic's horrific past. The voice and point of view of Yunior, the novel's principal narrator, suffuses the text, yet the reader is always made aware of this fact through the novel's metafictional devices. The reader is thus pulled in by the narrator's voice, but simultaneously encouraged to regard it with scepticism. The tension that is created as a consequence becomes fundamental to the novel, as the reader is continually asked to both believe and distrust the text. This tension is then used to explore the question of how authority functions, whose story to believe and why, in the context of Dominican history.

There has been much speculation about the reason for the sudden prominence of metafiction. A common explanation seems to be the rise of mass media. 'We suspect that our lives are "framed"', suggests Nicol, 'not necessarily in any sinister sense ... but because we experience the world as mediated through a range of discursive and narrative constructs, especially from culture, media and advertising' (35). If life, as Nicol maintains, comes to us already framed, metafiction attempts to systematically alert the reader to the fact that what they are reading is likewise already framed. Metafiction thus provides a critique of its own methods of construction, a sort of theory-in-practice, thereby examining 'the fundamental structures of narrative fiction' and exploring 'the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary text', as Waugh puts it (2). Metafiction can therefore remind us that 'narration is a form of *media*' and might thus be able to inoculate readers against the pernicious effects of media in general and of propaganda and myopic versions of history in particular (Waugh quoted in Nicol 39).

Oscar Wao continuously and systematically foregrounds its status as artificial construct in numerous ways, some quite explicit, some more subtle. The common denominator in its metafictional devices is laying bare the construction of the text, thus prompting the reader to consider how the narrative functions, and more broadly to become aware of the relationship between fiction, reality and history. The process of reading *Oscar Wao* can then be said to create a more aware, informed and thus critical

reader, which is in line with the postmodern scepticism associated with postmodern fiction. A critique of the Lyotardian grand narratives of white supremacy and patriarchy discussed in the previous chapter is implicit in this process of the reader becoming more aware of narratives as constructs. Because just like history is a narrative that has been constructed in a certain way, so have the narratives of white supremacy and patriarchy been created, holding within them the possibility of change.

Nicol summarises the effects of metafiction as drawing attention to the frames of fiction which realism usually conceals (Nicol 35). The main frame of a novel is the narration, and therefore much of the following analysis will be of the narrator of *Oscar Wao*: Yunior de Las Casas. As the narrator, Yunior constitutes the only way in which we gain access to the world of the text—his perspective thus colours everything we read. Before looking at Yunior’s metafictional style of storytelling, however, I will briefly discuss how his character itself gives rise to a heightened critical awareness in the reader.

The readers learn early on in the prologue that Yunior is the author of the book when he casually adds ‘while I was finishing this book’ to a sentence about posting something online (*Wao* 6). Eventually, it becomes clear that he teaches ‘composition and creative writing’ at a community college (336). He makes other references to his training in literature when he mentions that Oscar has ‘one of those epiphanies us lit majors are always forced to talk about’ (241), and when Yunior likens the beating of Oscar to ‘one of those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels: *endless*’ (310). As a result, the readers—provided they know what an MLA panel is—understand that the narrator is not a novice storyteller, but someone who knows how texts and stories work and can use that knowledge to achieve authority over the narrative by compelling the readers to trust him.

To make matters more complicated, many have speculated—and Díaz himself has lent support to the notion—that Yunior is Díaz’s alter-ego based on their biographical similarities. There seems to be no critical consensus on this point. Many articles simply take it for granted that Yunior is Díaz’s alter-ego and leave it at that.¹⁶

¹⁶ See for example: (1) Matt Okie. ‘*Mil Máscaras*: An Interview With Junot Díaz’. *Identity Theory*,

Some critics, however, suggest that the footnotes that pepper the novel are Díaz speaking directly to the reader, not Yuniór; others claim that ‘Díaz’s novel is his narrating character’s creation’.¹⁷ Of course, it is clear that Díaz is the author of the novel and Yuniór his character. To what extent they are the same, however, is not as easy to determine. The reason this question is relevant is because Yuniór is such a noticeable presence in the novel, and by extent, so would Díaz be. If one reads Yuniór as Díaz, then the narrator’s intrusions become the author stepping into his own text, breaking the narrative frame in the process. Although there are many compelling similarities between Yuniór and Díaz, the problem with fusing them is that one would have to rely mostly on outside sources. The novel itself does not do much to suggest that Yuniór is really Díaz, although their first names are quite similar and they are both writers. One cannot on the basis of the novel alone conflate Yuniór and Díaz, but there is enough there, perhaps, to induce the question of their relationship which is all that is needed for the reader to remain aware of the pervasive power of Yuniór as an author and narrator to control the story to his ends.

As a result of breaking the narrative frame by hinting at Yuniór’s status as both author and narrator, the machinery which perpetuates the illusion of fiction is exposed and foregrounded; this creates, in McHale’s terms, an ontological effect typical of postmodern writing, showing ‘[w]hat happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated’ (McHale 10). Pointing to the possible link between the narrator and the author blurs the boundaries

www.identitytheory.com/interview-pulitzer-winner-junot-diaz-wondrous-life-oscar-wao/. Accessed 17 Sep. 2017. (2) Gregg Barrios, “‘He is a writer of fiction. He puts on masks for a living.’: An Interview with Junot Díaz”. *Los Angeles Review of Books*, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/he-is-a-writer-of-fiction-he-puts-on-masks-for-a-living-an-interview-with-junot-diaz/>. Accessed 7 Jan. 2018. (3) Dan Duray, ‘Oh, Mi Corazón! Junot Díaz’s Alter Ego Goes Sad Sack in New Book of Short Stories’. *Observer*, <http://observer.com/2012/09/oh-mi-corazon-junot-diazs-alter-ego-goes-sad-sack-in-new-book-of-short-stories/>. Accessed 12 Sep. 2017.
¹⁷ Pamela J. Rader. “‘Trawling in Silences’: Finding Humanity in the Páginas en Blanco of History in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*”. *Label Me Latina/o*, vol. 2, Spring 2012, <http://labelmelatin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/“Trawling-in-Silences”-Finding-Humanity-in-the-Páginas-en-Blanco-of-History-in-Junot-Díaz’s-The-Brief-Wondrous-Life-of-Oscar-Wao.pdf>. Accessed 17 Sep 2017.

between fiction and reality, reminding us of the similarities between the two and inviting us to question where the fictional world begins and the real one ends. Nicol claims that the clash between the fictional world and the real world demonstrates to the reader that ‘fiction is fictional, but no more so than the real world’ (39). The collapsing of the boundary between fiction and reality, argues Nicol, not only shows how the real world seeps into the world of the novel, but that ‘the obverse also happens, the fictional world intrudes into the real world’ (39). The question of where to draw the line between fiction and reality, as I will touch on later in the chapter, undermines traditional historiography, but it also amplifies the tension between Yuniór’s creation of the narrative illusion and its simultaneous exposure.

Yuniór is, furthermore, a self-proclaimed ‘Watcher’, someone who observes the story from the outside like an impartial third-person narrator. Yuniór takes his nickname from Uatu the Watcher, a character in the Marvel universe who is bound by a vow to not interfere with humanity yet breaks his promise to help the Fantastic Four defeat the villain Galactus and save the Earth. In a similar way, Yuniór goes from being a passive observer, bound by the expectations of a third-person narrator not to interfere with the narrative, to participating in the story. Remarkably, the fact that Yuniór is a character in the story is not revealed until the exact middle of the novel.¹⁸ This revelation is both literally and figuratively central to the novel as it pulls back the curtain and shows us that Yuniór is not a third-person narrator after all, but a first-person narrator in disguise. Not only is Yuniór literarily savvy, but he is an integral part of the story he is telling, making it clear that his word cannot be taken as impartial. As a result, the novel is divided cleanly into two parts, and we are invited to re-evaluate what we have read previously and to proceed into the following half with a heightened awareness of the text as a construct. Yuniór’s first sentence as himself, ‘It started with me’, underlines the fact that the novel flows from him, ‘It’ referring possibly to the novel itself, or the impetus for telling it, or Yuniór’s connection to Oscar (173). Again the readers are reminded that the novel is a product of a certain point of view, and as a result, they are invited to appraise that perspective critically.

¹⁸ In the edition I have used the revelation occurs on page 173 of 345.

Perhaps the most damning aspect of Yunior's character is how closely it resembles Trujillo's. In fact, there are two crucial similarities between Trujillo and Yunior. Firstly, as was discussed in the previous chapter, they are both extremely hypermasculine, which is most clearly seen in their sexual prowess. Yunior describes himself as 'the biggest player of them all', 'who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts' (192). Trujillo is similarly notorious for 'fucking every hot girl in sight ... thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women' (3). Their shared hypermasculinity makes them suspect since the novel links hypermasculinity to the fukú via Trujillo, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Secondly, Yunior and Trujillo both wield autocratic power, Trujillo over the country he is ruling and the national story it produces, Yunior over the story he is telling us which is also partly the story of the Dominican Republic. They are thus competing, in a sense, for the authority to tell the story of the Dominican Republic and its people. Nicol explains that '[a]cknowledging the importance of framing in fiction means recognizing that anything we see in art is because we're *allowed* to see it by the author', not unlike how a dictator conceals information from the people (36). Just as Trujillo is described as being supposedly all-seeing and all-controlling, Yunior similarly controls what the reader can know. Narrators and dictators, in the sense of controlling information, are thus not that different. In a much-quoted footnote, Yunior contemplates the connection between writers and dictators:

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? ...Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (Díaz 97)

As was discussed in the previous chapter, this quotation illustrates the similarities in power between writers and dictators. Seeing writers as the natural enemies of dictators

is too simple because it assumes that writers are automatically benevolent and progressive simply because they oppose dictators. Instead, dictators see the potential in writers to be equally authoritative and oppressive. Yuniór's thought can thus be regarded as a subtle self-indictment, a warning to the reader that Yuniór, using his narrative charm, is attempting to create authority for himself and manipulate both our understanding of history and of himself as a character. Yuniór is in this sense a dictatorial narrator.

In a novel which is partly about the horrible ramifications of a dictator with autocratic power, having one narrator provide his single perspective on history is problematic. The metafictional elements of the novel are partly a response to this problem. According to Waugh, '[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion' (6). This ongoing opposition can be clearly seen in *Oscar Wao*, as Yuniór creates his narrative while simultaneously exposing his methods of construction. Yuniór's metafictional flourishes thus alert us to the irony of having a dictator-like narrator describing how bad a dictator is by foregrounding the devices he is using and asking us to scrutinize what we read, to not accept his story blindly. The question then becomes: What is Yuniór allowing us to see, what is he concealing and why?

An example of how Yuniór is a dictatorial narrator is that he never uses quotation marks to show who is speaking, and often merges spoken dialogue with his own observations, making his voice indistinguishable from the voices of other characters. This leaves us only the context to go on in figuring out whose voice we are hearing: 'How much Beli knew about the Gangster we will never know. She claims that he only told her he was a businessman. Of course I believed him. How was I supposed to know different? (124). It is easy to miss the use of pronouns and interpret this sentence as Yuniór believing Beli if you are not careful. The seamlessness between Yuniór's statements and those of the other characters subtly underscore the fact that Yuniór is the mind producing and telling the reader everything in the book, even though what he is telling us is often something someone else said.

What, then, about the chapter supposedly narrated mostly by Lola? The second chapter of the novel, 'Wildwood', begins with the cryptic proclamation: 'It's never the changes we want that change everything' (53). After this sentence, Yuniór switches from third to second person, and from roman letters to italics to differentiate his voice from the one that follows, addressing Lola and telling her about the moment where her story begins. After four pages, Lola picks up the narrative baton and continues her story, now in the first-person. On the surface, this is Lola herself writing and narrating, but as the readers have been made aware, Yuniór is the controlling presence of the book and so they can never be completely certain that Lola's story has not been altered by Yuniór. Monica Hanna raises several pertinent questions of to what extent the chapter is Lola speaking and how much Yuniór has interfered with it:

Is this really Lola speaking? If so, how? Is she collaborating in the writing of the text, or is Yuniór recording her thoughts? Who is Lola's narrative audience? Is Yuniór simply reconstructing Lola's voice, writing her voice himself, as a way to regain a connection to her?¹⁹

Curiously, Lola reports dialogue in the same way Yuniór does, by merging it into sentences without quotation marks. Stylistically, however, the chapter is quite different from the previous one. It has no footnotes and it lacks the many subchapters found elsewhere in the novel, creating a more coherent reading experience which at first suggests the uniqueness of Lola's voice. Chapter four, however, uses the exact same stylistic features, continuing in one flow uninterrupted by footnotes or subchapters, but Lola is not the narrator of that chapter—Yuniór is.

The critical attitude, created partly by the fragmentation discussed in the previous chapter, and partly by Yuniór's suspect character as both dictatorial narrator and author, is cultivated further by his metafictional style. As mentioned previously, by telling a story while simultaneously exposing its seams, Yuniór creates the fundamental

¹⁹ Monica Hanna. "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*". *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 498-520.

driving tension of the novel which compels the reader to remain alert. In contrast to a traditional, impersonal and objective narrator which typically belongs to the realist tradition, Yuniór is subjective in the extreme. Whereas a traditional narrator is often concealed to allow for the illusion of mimetic realism, Yuniór never lets the readers forget who is telling the story by consistently drawing attention to the frame of the story: his narration.

There are several principal ways in which Yuniór calls attention to this frame, but the most noticeable one is perhaps the irreverent playfulness that is at the core of his style. This is exemplified by his casual use of slang, profanity, sarcasm and dark humour. For example, he introduces the atrocities committed by Trujillo with the phrase, ‘Outstanding accomplishments include’; and he gives the dictator the honorifics, ‘El Jefe, the Failed Cattle-Thief, and Fuckface’ (3, 2). It is not hard to notice that Yuniór has a very specific point of view, and the insistent sarcasm and playfulness leaves the readers no option but to notice and engage with it.²⁰ Consider the following quote delivered by Yuniór in the prologue covering the fukú:

You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission’s question, Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God’s Honest Truth: It wasn’t the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe ... It was Trujillo; it was the fukú. Where in coñazo do you think the so-called Curse of the Kennedys comes from? How about Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam? I mean, Negro, *please*. (4)

The conversational tone he strikes, created in part by his casual use of profanity and the interspersal of Spanish and slang, is so conspicuous that the reader cannot help but see the narrative frame. Yuniór’s use of language is often highlighted through his use of

²⁰ The New York Times’ review of the book describes Yuniór’s voice as ‘one of contemporary fiction’s most distinctive and irresistible new voices’. Michiko Kakutani. ‘Travails of an Outcast’. *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/books/04diaz.html?mcubz=1&mtref=undefined&gwh=787968AFB2F9F29ABE4CABB578D4B557&gwt=pay. Accessed 29 Dec. 2017.

italics ('I mean, Negro, *please*') and capitalised words ('the God's Honest Truth'). This effect is reinforced by the frequent use of rhetorical questions and direct address. Yunior continually prods the readers to make sure they do not take his story as the one true record of what happened, or 'the God's Honest Truth' as he ironically puts it. By being "in your face", the text forces the readers to notice that what they are reading is the product of one person. And as the novel continuously warns, single voices are something to be wary of in the context of dictatorship.

As the example above also shows, Yunior has no qualms about referring to himself as the narrator and author of the text, or Watcher as he does here. As has been discussed, Yunior's claiming the role of author encourages the reader to pay attention to him as a narrative frame. Yunior also refers to the actual process of writing as well as the result: the physical artefact of the book: When Beli visits El Hollywood, a nightclub in Santo Domingo, a footnote tells us that this was a 'favorite hangout of Trujillo's, [Yunior's] mother tells [him] when the manuscript is almost complete' (119). Similarly, a footnote tells us of revisions in the script:

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa ... Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraph of chapter one, "Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World") wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (137-138)

Referring to an earlier chapter is another metafictional nod to the reader since it breaks the fourth wall by acknowledging that the narrator is aware of the novel not only as a story he happens to be telling, but as a novel complete with paragraphs and chapters. More importantly, the readers are again made aware not only of Yunior as the author, but also of his process of writing, including his authorial choices. Some things he changes in the name of verisimilitude, yet sometimes his aesthetic taste is apparently

deemed more important. Knowing this, the readers are invited to ponder what else he may have changed because he ‘liked the image too much’.

Towards the end of the book when Oscar falls in love with a prostitute in the Dominican Republic, Yunió inserts a subchapter called ‘A NOTE FROM YOUR AUTHOR’ where the question of narrative verisimilitude is explicitly discussed with the reader:

I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he’s writing Suburban Tropical now. A puta and she’s not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? ... Would it be better if I had Oscar meet Ybón at the World Famous Lavacarro...? Yes? But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can’t we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years? (295-296)

The many direct addresses almost badger the reader into giving in and believing in Yunió’s story. On one level, we know that the novel is a work of fiction and that Yunió’s arguments have no meaning outside of the text, but on another we are willing to suspend our disbelief and engage with Yunió’s reasoning.²¹ Paradoxically, pointing out that his story has some unbelievable elements, but that he had to include them because they are true nonetheless, engenders trust in the reader; yet the reference to the title of the novel and the inclusion of sci-fi once again reminds us that we are reading a fictional text. Yunió’s defensive posturing and his appeals to “the truth” become suspicious in the light of his dictatorial powers, for if what we are reading is fiction as the metafictional elements remind us, then what is Yunió trying to achieve by convincing us of his story’s true nature?

A particularly noticeable feature of the novel’s metafictional strategy is its use of footnotes. Like the rest of the novel’s metafictional elements, they draw attention to the framing of the text and amplify the tension between trust and disbelief. One way the

²¹ And if one is unsure of the nature of the text, the paratextual note preceding the first pages of the story confirms that it is a work of fiction, as does the novel’s subtitle: ‘A Novel’.

footnotes highlight this tension is by granting credibility to Yuniors since they display his erudition and authority on the subject of the history of the Dominican Republic; yet, the footnotes also undermine his authority since they expose the text as a construct.

Díaz himself has addressed his use of footnotes in many interviews, dismissing the notion that they are simply ‘a postmodern trick’.²² According to Díaz, their main function is

to create a double narrative. The footnotes, which are in the lower frequencies, challenge the main text, which is the higher narrative. 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 a single voice—this felt like a smart move to me.²³

For there to be a double narrative with the equivalents of a king and a jester, however, there needs to be two narrators which would assume that the voice in the footnotes is someone other than Yuniors. There is no evidence in the text of this, and since Yuniors continually underscores the fact that he is the author of the text, we must presume that he also wrote the footnotes. Furthermore, some footnotes confirm that the author of the footnotes is the same as the author of the main text. A sentence where Yuniors refers to himself as ‘your humble Watcher’, for example, is followed by a footnote that begins with: ‘My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside’ (95). Jack Kirby is a co-creator of the *Fantastic Four* and Uatu the Watcher, which means that whomever is claiming the reference to Kirby must be the same one who called himself Watcher.

Perhaps Díaz does not mean what he says about two voices literally, but that the content and purpose of the footnotes undermine the main narrative? This seems more plausible, since many of the footnotes give the reader historical information about the

²² Raphael Sanchez. ‘Author Junot Díaz Delivers Annual McFadden Memorial Lecture’. *YouTube*, uploaded by IndyPL, 3 March 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ_cJVLKgv8&index=4&list=WL.

²³ Meghan O’Rourke. ‘Questions for Junot Díaz’. *Slate*, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/recycled/2008/04/questions_for_junot_daz.html. Accessed 28 Oct. 2017.

Dominican Republic and the Trujillo regime in particular. The tone and style of the footnotes match that of the main text, however. In fact, some footnotes read as direct continuations of the main text, such as footnote #6 which describes how Oscar suffers for liking books, complete with dialogue from his mother telling him to go outside (22-23). There is no court jester attempting to subvert the main text to be seen, only Yuniór telling the story. One does not need another voice contesting the main one, since in this case the voice of the king—the narrator—undermines his own authority by calling attention to its subjectivity, and therefore, its limitations. Reading Díaz's statement on the footnotes generously, the voice of the jester and the king can be traced back to the inherent doubleness of Yuniór's voice.

All of these aspects of Yuniór's character and style add up to a narrator that readers cannot help but notice and engage with despite the atrocious sexual politics which are evident in his treatment of Lola, his descriptions of women and his similarities to Trujillo. In fact, his problematic nature as a supposed "good guy" who exposes the horrors of the Trujillato and its sexist nature while continuously treating women in a less than stellar manner makes him a compelling figure. The case of Yuniór is not as extreme as the notoriously repulsive yet captivating narrator of the controversial classic *Lolita* (1955), for example, but the dynamics are similar. Both narrators are engaging despite their appalling behaviour and attitude. It is impossible, as a result, to read the novel without paying attention to how the narration, the principal frame of the novel, can affect the reader. By being colourful, subversive and playful, Yuniór is alerting the reader to the fact that texts have authors and that authors have agendas. In the context of a novel which tells the story of how a family is haunted by a dictatorship, the dangers of a single voice creating a totalizing story of a nation is something to regard with caution.

As I have attempted to show, the novel's metafictional strategies encourage the reader to consider how narratives are constructed. Thematically, the construction of a national history lies at the heart of *Oscar Wao*. The novel not only tells the story of the de Léons/Cabrals, but of the Dominican Republic starting with the arrival of Columbus in America, to the subsequent eradication of the indigenous Taínos and the importing of

slaves from Africa to the rise of Trujillo and beyond. In contrast to Díaz's notion of the footnotes undermining the main text, the opposite is more correct. The relationship between the footnotes and the main text constitutes a reversal of the historical power dynamic that has caused the suffering of Oscar's family. The narratives of the historically marginalized are told in the main text while Trujillo is literally reduced to a footnote in history, a strategy that subtly acknowledges the traditional power relations of historiography. Reversing the narratives in this way, making the story of ordinary people the focal point instead of the grand historical figures like Columbus and Trujillo, invites the reader to see how history has shaped the destinies of the main characters, how their marginalisation has resulted from the age-old exploitation of people by the ruling regime. The fukú, 'the Curse and Doom of the New World', that haunts the Caribbean and its diaspora, can thus be understood as a result of this historical and systematic oppression (*Wao* 1). Telling a story that comes out of this oppression, then, is an attempt to open up the Dominican Republic's national history and expose its historical blind spots.

The combination of history and metafiction has been studied by Linda Hutcheon who coined the concept of historiographic metafiction, which describes any self-conscious work of fiction concerned with the writing of history. As has been discussed, metafiction often challenges traditional realist modes of representation by alerting us to its nature as a construct, thereby reminding readers that reality is similarly constructed or mediated (Nicol 99). Historiographic metafiction extends this insight to history, pointing out that it is similarly constructed. 'History is not "the past", but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past', as Nicol puts it (99). Hutcheon argues, furthermore, that history and the novel share some significant conventions: 'selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing, and emplotment' (Hutcheon 111). Both the novel and history function, therefore, as 'signifying systems in our culture; both are what [E.L.] Doctorow once called modes of "mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning"—and meaning is itself constructed and imposed rather than found' (Hutcheon 112).

As an example of historiographic metafiction, *Oscar Wao* similarly attempts to mediate the world—and Dominican history in particular—‘for the purpose of introducing meaning’ to it, to interpret it from a new perspective. This new perspective consists of understanding the “discovery” of the New World from the point of view of its indigenous peoples and the slaves that were brought to it, and tracing the effects of the country's bloody founding to its contemporary diaspora. Telling that story through historiographic metafiction allows the novel to dismiss the notion of history as a fixed entity which allows for new understandings of it. The value of writing and reading historiographical metafiction is not to completely undermine the validity of historiography, according to Nicol, but to “‘open ... up” to interpretation what would otherwise be a closed, didactic form of rhetoric’ (Nicol 104). ‘Opening up’ history in this manner prevents it from being ‘conclusive and teleological’, which has important political consequences since ‘there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth (Hutcheon, 112, 109). What postmodern fiction attempts to point out is not necessarily ‘the God’s Honest Truth’ as much as it seeks to question whose truth gets told (*Wao* 4). In the context of dictatorship, questioning the official truth and opening it up to inquiry is vital for oppressed voices to be heard.

As has been discussed, the novel continuously foregrounds the fact that narratives always come framed, and that meaning is given to historical events rather than ‘uncovered’ as Yunió would have it. Using metafictional devices, and especially paratextual conventions of historiography such as footnotes, both ‘inscribe[s] and undermine[s] the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations’ (Hutcheon 122). By opening up history through historiographic metafiction, *Oscar Wao* reveals that history’s empty pages. This is symbolized in the story by the recurring images of *páginas en blanco* and the lost writings of Oscar and Abelard. On one occasion, Oscar sends Lola a letter telling her that he has sent her a package containing the manuscript of a new book based on some sort of investigation: ‘This contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.)’ (343). The Cosmo DNA is a device from the TV series

Star Blazers (1979) used to rid the Earth of radiation which has driven humanity underground. Oscar's writing might thus be the cure to the troubles of his family: the fukú, the invisible systems of oppression that haunt them. Of course, 'the fucking thing never arrived!', and the readers are left to ponder what Oscar's solution could have been (344).

Abelard is also thought to have written an exposé on Trujillo's supernatural powers, ultimately leading to Abelard's imprisonment and death, although this is never confirmed. Yuniór dismisses the fabled book as the reason for Abelard's imprisonment, but cannot help but recount some odd details that lend some credence to the rumour. Most striking and significant among those details is the fact that none of Abelard's books or papers survived:

You want creepy? Not one single example of his handwriting remains. I mean, OK, Trujillo was thorough. But not one scrap of paper with his handwriting? That was more than thorough. You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that. (256)

Alluding back to the connection between writers and dictators, the readers are reminded of the power writing has to undermine authority, even though it simultaneously erects its own authority in the process. Opening up the gaps of history therefore holds the potential to upend it. 'But hey', Yuniór warns in a final metafictional nod to the reader, 'it's only a story, with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd could love' (256).

The novel ends with Yuniór imagining the creation of another book that will be the undoing of the curse. He imagines that Lola's daughter Isis will visit him so Yuniór can show where he has stored all the writings of Oscar, his 'books, his games, his manuscripts, his comic books, his papers' (340). Yuniór's hope is that she will 'take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insight and she'll put an end to it' (341). Yuniór's hope is that by reading and taking in all the fragments of lived experience, Isis will be able to construct a new narrative that finally dissolve the curse.

There is a fourth book that attempts to do just this, and that book, of course, is *Oscar Wao* itself. Yunior states at the beginning of the novel that he has a fukú story of his own which turns out to be the novel he is narrating (6). As has been discussed, the novel attempts to fill the gaps and silences of history with the stories of the novel's characters, placing them center-stage in contrast to the footnotes. Writing thus becomes a form of resistance, for if history is a narrative, writing can reshape that narrative into something more positive, more liberating for future generations. As he closes the prologue, Yunior ponders: 'Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell' (7).

According to Nicol, historiographic metafiction is

not simply a playful parody of history, making fun of our habit of believing in something which is patently fictional. Rather, it affirms over and over again that history is crucial to our lives ... [because] whether we like it or not and whether or not we have been directly affected by historical events ourselves we are the products of history and the course our lives take depends upon it. (Nicol 104)

Oscar Wao makes it clear that history is not detached from our lives, but intervenes directly in them. One cannot understand the lives of Oscar's family, for example, without understanding the history of the Caribbean from the perspective of the marginalised. By opening up history through historiographic metafiction, the novel exposes the gaps left in the wake of the Trujillo regime, 'a silence that stands monument to the generations' (253). Writing into this silence, Yunior attempts in some small way to redress the grand historical injustices brought to bear on the people of the Caribbean.

In conclusion, by obsessively foregrounding its own construction, *Oscar Wao* encourages the reader to gain a heightened awareness of the link between fictional narratives and historical ones. Metafiction thus allows the reader to see the limits of representation, how fiction and reality easily clash. The ontological ambiguity resulting from that clash is embraced in the novel's complex use of intertextuality which melds

sci-fi, fantasy and horror with history to capture the extreme and bewildering nature of Dominican history and the experience of its diaspora. This compelling mix of genres, languages and high- and lowbrow culture is what the next chapter will explore.

‘Who More Sci-fi Than Us?’: Intertextuality and Diasporic Identity

The title of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* encapsulates much of the novel’s rich intertextuality as it combines four separate allusions into one line of text. Firstly, *The Brief Wondrous Life* alludes to the *Fantastic Four* comic-book series (1961-present) in which the villain Galactus asks, ‘Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to Galactus??’ (*Wao* epigraph 1). The focus on ‘brief nameless lives’ signals the novel’s concern with narrating the short and anonymous lives of its main characters in contrast to the historical figure Trujillo who resembles Galactus in his portrayal as comically evil. Secondly, ‘wondrous’ connotes the fantastical genres of magical realism, sci-fi and fantasy that both figure in the story itself and serve as Oscar and Yunior’s main interests. Thirdly, the title alludes to the short story ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’ (1936) by Ernest Hemingway which explores the relationship between masculinity and love: Francis Macomber, the protagonist of the story, is killed while attempting to shoot a lion to impress his wife. Oscar is likewise killed as a result of standing up for his love. Lastly, Oscar gets his nickname Oscar Wao when Yunior says he looks like ‘that fat homo Oscar Wilde’, and a Spanish-speaker overhears him and asks who Oscar Wao is (187). The mix of Western and Caribbean culture and language, and specifically how the Caribbean incorporates the Western into its forms of art—Wilde into Wao, Hemingway’s character for Díaz’s—indicates the text’s approach of merging Western and Caribbean influences into something new.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, considering the novel’s abundance of intertextual elements, that critical attention has been especially focused on the novel’s vibrant mix of genres, languages and registers. Although using different registers and languages in a text is not traditionally considered intertextuality, I still want to include them in the discussion since they are an essential part of the novel’s postmodern aesthetic, and work much in the same way the text’s mix of genres does. That is to say, when I use the term intertextuality and intertext, I am not only referring to the novel’s allusions and references to other texts, but to its diversity of languages and registers as well.

The debate among scholars has mainly emphasised two separate views of the novel's use of intertextuality. On the one hand, it has been argued that the intertextuality primarily creates an aesthetic that disturbs stable notions of cultural identity. This aesthetic, some critics propose, ultimately forces readers to become more aware of the political implications of certain constructions of history and identity. On the other hand, some mainly see the novel's intertextuality as a way of representing and understanding Dominican history and the experiences and identities of the country's diaspora. I do not want to suggest that these critics are divided, however; they often provide complementary views of the intertextuality in *Oscar Wao*.

Building on the discourse of these scholars, this chapter will argue that the intertextuality in *Oscar Wao* contributes to the novel's overall postmodern aesthetic while simultaneously creating a new way of conceptualising the history and identity of the Dominican diaspora. The novel weaves together seemingly disparate genres, registers and languages to create a postmodern aesthetic that both disturbs fixed ideas of cultural dichotomies and complicates the idea of stable cultural identity. The readers, moreover, are concurrently alerted to their complicity in marginalising certain discourses by encouraging them to engage with the novel's many intertexts. But the novel does not simply deconstruct Dominican diasporic identity and leave the reader in a haze of postmodern nihilism. Instead, by combining Western genre literature with magical realism—traditionally seen as a Latin American genre—the text allows for a conception of diasporic identity not as something fixed, but as something changing or 'becoming' to borrow Stuart Hall's phrase.²⁴ Similarly, the text helps to forge a new understanding of the Dominican diaspora's history by using genre literature, primarily sci-fi and fantasy, as a lens that is suited for grasping the extreme and sometimes otherworldly nature of Dominican history—a history that includes genocide, slavery and a brutal dictatorship. Ultimately, *Oscar Wao* suggests that to better understand the experiences and identities of Dominicans living in the United States today, we need to connect to their past in new and imaginative ways that acknowledge and convey the near fantastical horrors of Dominican history.

²⁴ Stuart Hall. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishhart, 1990, pp. 222-237, p. 225.

As is the case with fragmentation and metafiction, intertextuality is often considered a central characteristic of postmodern fiction. The term itself was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s to emphasise and explore the relationship between texts. The connection between postmodern fiction and intertextuality can be made using Nicol's three characteristics of postmodern fiction, which I have used in the previous two chapters. These are: (1) foregrounding the text as a construct; (2) critiquing a realist approach to narrative, either implicitly or explicitly; and (3) drawing the reader's attention to the process of interpretation (Nicol xvi). As I hope to make clear, *Oscar Wao*'s intertextuality is uniquely postmodern in that it fulfils all three of Nicol's criteria.

As its title suggests, *Oscar Wao* is dense with a large array of intertexts. In terms of fiction it includes comic books, literary fiction, sci-fi, fantasy, horror, magical realism, cult films and video games among others. Furthermore, Nien-Ming Ch'ien and Rune Graulund identify six different registers in the novel: '(1) homogenous or standard Spanish; (2) Dominican Spanish; (3) street-speak English; (4) Spanglish; (5) nerd-speak' and '(6) academic jargon'.²⁵

One effect of this abundance of intertextual references is to draw attention to the constructed nature of the text. Taking the title as an example again, it almost flaunts its textual nature by including four intertexts in one line of text. Because of this, it is hard to forego the fact that the title is made up of several other texts. By constantly blending and moving between different intertexts, then, the novel continuously draws attention to its own status as a construct which illustrates one of Nicol's traits of postmodern writing.

Yet the intertextuality in *Oscar Wao* does more than emphasise its artificial nature; it also calls attention to the similarly constructed divide between major and minor discourses such as genre fiction and literary fiction, but also the cultural divisions of what is Dominican and what is American. Discussing Hutcheon's work on parody in postmodern fiction, Graham Allen suggests that intertextuality is often the more fitting term:

²⁵ Rune Graulund. 'Generous Exclusion: Register and Readership in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'. *MELUS*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2014, pp. 31-48, pp. 33-34.

Whether we employ the term parody or intertextuality, it is clear that for critics such as Hutcheon Postmodern literature deploys a vast array of contemporary and historical forms [sic]. It does this to register its dependence upon established forms of representation ... But at the moment that it registers this fact, its juxtaposition of styles and codes, of different and sometimes apparently incompatible forms of representation, serves to question, disturb and even subvert the dominance of those established forms.²⁶

‘[T]o question, disturb and ... subvert the dominance of ... established forms’ by juxtaposing various genres and languages neatly captures much of the way in which intertextuality functions in *Oscar Wao*.²⁷

The title proves a useful example once again as it demonstrates how genre fiction, a traditionally low or marginalised form of culture, can be combined with what is typically seen as a high form of culture, namely literary fiction by writers such as Hemingway and Wilde. The novel’s two epigraphs illustrate the same juxtaposition: the first one is taken from the *Fantastic Four* comic-book series, and the second one is a poem by the nobel laureate Derek Walcott. References to genre fiction, literary fiction and various registers of Spanish and English all co-exist side by side and in combinations without one being foregrounded as more important than the other. By blending such a vast array of major and minor discourses, the distinction between them becomes blurred. In turn, the loss of boundaries between major and minor discourses subverts the notion of a majority discourse itself.

Furthermore, if Spanish and English, comic books and literary fiction, can be mixed so thoroughly so as to lose their crucial distinctions, the novel suggests, then so can cultures more generally. This amalgamation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a boundary between what and who is an American or a Dominican. In the context

²⁶ Graham Allen. *Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2011, p. 190.

²⁷ See Monica Hanna for an in-depth examination of how the novel subverts established forms of storytelling and historiography to create a ‘resistance history’ of the Dominican Republic: “‘Reassembling the Fragments’: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’. *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 498-520.

of the novel's collapsing of culturally constructed boundaries, the notion of a stable cultural identity thus becomes undermined. I will return to this point after considering how the reader is complicit in marginalising certain discourses and favouring others.

Rune Graulund supports the notion that the novel's irreverent mix of intertexts deconstructs traditional cultural dichotomies. He takes as his main object of study the novel's 'stubborn refusal to decode and explain' its many intertextual elements (34). Most of the time, the novel simply incorporates Spanish, references to genre literature and other intertexts without providing any clarification of what they mean. When Oscar refers to his sister as his 'Bene Gesserit Witch' (343), for instance, the reader is never informed that it is a reference to the seminal sci-fi novel *Dune* (1965)²⁸. Likewise, the significance of the allusion to 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' is never explained by the text. By including such a vast range of intertexts and withholding any explanations, Graulund argues, the text levels the playing field of discourses so to speak: 'Díaz's refusal to allow any one register dominance deconstructs a range of linguistic, national, and cultural dichotomies such as English/Spanish, American/Dominican, and non-migrant/migrant' (32). The allusion to *Dune*, for instance, is placed on the same level as the allusion to 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' in the title: neither are explained, and so neither are favoured or given special consideration. In turn, this means that no one readership is granted priority. A sci-fi enthusiast might catch the reference to *Dune* but not to Hemingway's short story, whereas a Dominican would likely pick up the Spanish and the Dominican slang, but might miss some other references. By ensuring that 'no one group gets the right or mastery' of *Oscar Wao*, the novel dissolves the binaries of "us" and "them," major and minor, and mainstream and margin' (Graulund 39).

Taking the novel's use of Spanish as an example illustrates Graulund's point in more detail. In an interview, Díaz points out that he expects the reader to engage with the text and do some work, including engaging with Spanish. Responding to a question of whether he is worried his readers will understand the Spanish in the novel, or if he expects them to pick up a dictionary, Díaz comments:

²⁸ The Bene Gesserit are a religious sisterhood that undergo gruelling training to achieve near supernatural powers, and so the term is not an insult, but a compliment.

I've almost never read an adult book where I didn't have to pick up a dictionary. I guess I participate more in my readings and expect the same out of my readership. I want people to research, to ask each other, to question ... And at a keeping-it-real level: Isn't it about time that folks started getting used to the fact that the United States comprises large Spanish-speaking segments? (O'Rourke)

This statement draws attention to the political aspect of including Spanish in the novel. Indeed, the novel is brimming with Spanish, and in contrast to prevalent publishing standards where foreign words are italicised, the Spanish in *Oscar Wao* remains in roman writing and is only explained once in the novel.²⁹ Not foregrounding standard English as the default language removes some of its privilege even though most of the novel is in English. In their highly influential work on postcolonial fiction *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explain how 'glossing gives the translated word and thus the "receptor" culture, the higher status'.³⁰ As Díaz's comments suggest, not glossing or translating the Spanish can be read as a politically subversive move, since Spanish is not an official language in the United States despite having 40 million speakers. As a result of mixing Spanish and English in a way that does not foreground any of them as the standard language, *Oscar Wao* paradoxically manages to practice what Graulund terms 'inclusion through exclusion' since the text 'turns all of [its] registers into minor discourses' (37).

In the interview above, Díaz also confirms that the novel is challenging, and that he presumes his readers will put in some effort to understand it. Even though his expectations of his readers have no bearing on how to analyse the novel, the text itself seems to have similar expectations of its readers. By challenging the readers with many different intertexts, the novel strongly encourages them to do research and ask questions. This challenge becomes a part of the novel's postmodern aesthetic as it

²⁹ See footnote #5 in the novel where the word *parigüayo* is explained at length (20).

³⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989, p. 66.

requires its readers to become aware of their process of interpretation which is another one of Nicol's characteristics of postmodern fiction. Allen explains that an intertextual perspective shifts the location of meaning: instead of meaning being something independent in the text that the reader simply extracts through interpretation, intertextuality highlights and examines how meaning is dependent on the systems, codes and traditions that have been built by previous texts. For example, *Oscar Wao* is to a large extent made up of its references to genre fiction, but it also relies on older Caribbean literature. Seen from this point of view, '[t]he act of reading ... plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts' (Allen 1). Since meaning is no longer something located in one single text, but dispersed between countless other texts, the onus is on the reader to engage not only with the primary text, but also its intertexts. Applied to *Oscar Wao*, this means that to fully understand it, readers have to venture beyond the novel to read and study its numerous intertexts. For instance, readers cannot completely grasp what Yunior means when he compares Trujillo's Dominican Republic to Mordor without having read *The Lord of the Rings*. As a consequence of moving between different texts and thinking about how they relate to each other, the readers' attentions are drawn to their process of reading and interpretation.

Sean P. O'Brien sees the activation of the reader as the key feature of the novel's intertextuality as it 'forces readers to consciously deal with the challenges of intertextuality and the cultural knowledge it requires'.³¹ He further argues that the novel confronts the reader with three 'specialized knowledge bases': genre literature [meaning comic books, sci-fi, fantasy and related genres], Dominican history and Spanish (78). I would add to these the different registers that Ch'ien and Graulund identify that were discussed earlier. As is clear from these lists and the discussion so far, the novel

³¹ Sean P. O'Brien. 'Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, pp. 75-94, p. 77.

contains a huge diversity of intertextual knowledge bases, and can therefore be difficult to fully understand.³²

To make matters even harder for the reader, these knowledge bases are unevenly glossed by the text as Graulund showed: Dominican history is extensively explained, but Spanish is not translated, for example. Whenever readers come across a confusing allusion to genre literature or a Spanish expression, they have the option to ‘research or simplify’, meaning they can either look up what the intertext means or ignore it (O’Brien 78). In doing so, the text forces the reader to decide what is important to understand, and what can be safely ignored, or in O’Brien’s words, ‘what is crucial and what is marginal’ (87).

The novel’s use of Spanish is one of the intertexts, or knowledge bases to use O’Brien’s term, that is consistently incorporated into the text. For any reader who does not understand Spanish, almost every page poses the choice of researching or simplifying, looking up the word or expression or simply ignoring it. A third option that O’Brien overlooks is that the reader often can make informed guesses based on context and similarity to other languages. When Oscar’s mother does not allow Oscar’s friend in the house, for instance, she is reported saying: ‘A puertorican over here? Jamás!’ (15). Based on the context of Oscar’s mother barring Puerto Ricans from her house, it is easy enough to understand that *jamás* must be negative, and any readers familiar with French might understand the word based on the similarity between *jamais* and *jamás*. Whether or not they know that it means ‘never’ is not vital to their understanding.

Still, O’Brien claims that ‘crucial information is communicated in slang-filled Spanish that cannot be deciphered through context clues’ (79). As evidence for his claim, O’Brien mentions the scene where Oscar’s uncle gives him advice about girls. The uncle’s advice can be summed up by him telling Oscar to ‘grab a muchacha, y météselo’ [grab a girl and stick it in her] (*Wao* 25). It is true that the finer details are lost on a reader without knowledge of Spanish, but since the verb is untranslated it is not hard to guess the rest based on context. The text has already made clear that men in the Dominican Republic are supposed to be macho and dominant since Oscar is

³² I have made good use of the website www.annotated-oscar-wao.com whose existence supports the notion that the novel requires a lot of work from the reader.

characterised by how traditionally un-Dominican he is (*Wao* 11). Yunió even introduces the *metéselo*-scene by pointing out that Oscar was ‘supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in bitches with both hands’ (25). Based on this context, a reader could understand the gist of the scene reasonably well without knowing Spanish. However, this is not to suggest that a passive reading of the novel would work easily. Even though inferring meaning through context is closer to simplifying than researching, making informed guesses still means engaging with the intertext in question and assigning it some importance. In this way, the reader plays an active role in either centering or marginalising Spanish. O’Brien’s claim that the novel requires the reader to research certain things is slightly overstated, then, but the larger point of the reader having to choose what is marginal and what is not still stands.

Furthermore, the dynamic of ‘researching or simplifying’ applies to all of the novel’s intertexts. By being suffused with Spanish, genre literature and different registers, the novel continuously asks the reader to engage with its many intertexts. By repeating the choice of researching or simplifying throughout the novel, the text prompts the readers to notice their own ‘patterns of inquiry’ as well as their ignorance (O’Brien 78). Put simply, O’Brien suggests that the novel pushes the reader ‘to decide what is crucial and what is marginal in a book that is explicitly *about* social, cultural, and historical marginalization’, and to contend with his or her complicity in any social issues stemming from marginalisation (86-87).

O’Brien makes a compelling claim. Indeed, the novel’s intertextuality makes the reader partake in a process of centering and marginalising its various discourses. Thematically, the novel explores issues of marginalisation through all of its main characters. Oscar’s alienation, for example, stems from his identity as a not-quite Dominican, not-quite American, and a fantasy and sci-fi enthusiast who is seen as a nerd by his friends. If the readers continuously choose to ignore researching the references to sci-fi and fantasy, they marginalise those discourses in the same way that Oscar’s peers marginalise him for liking those genres. A more politically salient example, moreover, might be the choice of researching or simplifying the Spanish in the novel. If American readers were to sideline such an important aspect of the book, they

would simultaneously discriminate against Spanish. That is to say, such readers would deem Spanish not important enough to learn about which points to real-world consequences of marginalising Spanish in the United States. Encouraging the readers to see they might be complicit in such issues of marginalisation due to the choices they make as they read forms part of the novel's overall postmodern aesthetic as it seeks to create more informed and critically engaged readers.

The connection between reading and engaging with different kinds of texts and the real-world consequences of these activities is suggested at the end of the novel when Yunior ponders how his choices have affected the world. He regrets the way he has treated Lola, and—as has been discussed in the previous chapters—even imagines her daughter Isis coming to visit him to learn about the family curse. He envisions how he will show Isis all of Oscar's 'books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers' (340). Yunior's hope is that she will then stay and find the cure for the curse by studying Oscar's texts: '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' (340-341). In Yunior's imagination, Isis acts like a model reader: she studies the variety of textual fragments, provides her own interpretation and reaches an understanding that goes beyond the texts and can be applied to the real world.

The name Isis is in itself interesting from an intertextual point of view. In Egyptian mythology, Isis is the sister and wife of Osiris.³³ In one story, Osiris dies and his body is hacked into pieces and scattered across the land by his brother Set. When Isis learns of this, she travels the country to find the pieces of Osiris and put his body together. She eventually succeeds, but never finds his penis. Reading the story metaphorically, Isis literally taking the fragments of man and making him whole again can be seen as a metaphor for how to fix or repair men, and by extent, the whole of humanity since 'man' has traditionally served as a metaphor for all of humankind. In the context of *Oscar Wao* where hypermasculinity—most notably exemplified by Trujillo and Yunior—has been linked to the curse, it is interesting to note that a prominent

³³ See Joshua J. Mark. 'Osiris'. *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, www.ancient.eu/osiris/. Accessed 29 October 2017.

symbol of masculinity is left out. Like Isis in the novel, the reader is prompted by the text to research and engage with various intertexts, to think about questions of marginalisation and how their own choices affect the world, and perhaps even add some insight of their own. In Yuniors mind, such a reader might help move the world closer to a better place, 'A Stronger Loving World' (*Wao* 341).³⁴

So far the discussion has focused on how the intertextual elements of the novel destabilise notions of cultural boundaries and identities, a notion that is often seen as a hallmark of postmodern writing. As an illustration, Butler asserts that postmodern novels

typically offer the reader a surfeit of intertextual references and allusions which seem, tantalizingly, to point to a single explanatory master-narrative but in the end lead us to nothing except an ironic recognition of how master-narratives function. (12)

As I have tried to show in the previous chapters, *Oscar Wao* certainly does subvert master narratives and illustrate how they function through its use of fragmentation and metafiction. However, while its deployment of intertextuality fills a similar function in that it disturbs stable notions of cultural identity, its intertextual fragments add up to something more than an 'ironic recognition' of how master narratives function: they allow for a new understanding of Dominican diasporic identity by refashioning it through a combination of Western genre literature and Caribbean literature and history.

In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall identifies two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first way defines cultural identity 'in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self"' (Hall 223). This perspective considers cultural identity as an unchanging 'essence' that cultural production simply reflects. The diaspora of a given community must then 'discover, excavate, bring to light and

³⁴ The Isis-myth also mirrors O'Brien's researching or simplifying. On one level, readers might not think anything of the name, while others recognise it from Egyptian mythology; on another level, readers could remember how Isis collects the fragments of her husband; and on yet another level, readers might recall how she leaves out his penis. This example illustrates how few readers are able to fully comprehend the intertextuality of the novel. While marginalising Egyptian mythology does not carry much if any real-world consequences, it does show how the novel's abundance of intertexts result in a refusal to grant privilege to any particular readership.

express' this identity through their cultural production (Hall 223). For diasporic subjects to understand themselves, then, they need to unearth and explore their past to find their 'true' identities. From this point of view, *Oscar Wao* would be seen as a novel concerned with digging up the 'true', essential nature of Dominicans and representing it, yet such a view would overlook the novel's postmodern strategies which undermine ideas of a stable cultural identity.

The second way of conceiving of cultural identity is more apt in describing the kind of cultural identity *Oscar Wao* creates. Put simply, whereas the first view sees cultural identity as fixed, the second one views it as fluid, as 'a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"' (Hall 225). In other words, this position regards identity as something malleable and under constant change rather than timeless and essential. As Hall puts it: 'Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past ... [cultural] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (225). This does not mean that identity is completely independent of the past, however; rather, identity is created by the way one relates to history. In this way, diasporic subjects need not just connect to the past, but also incorporate that past into their current lives and identities. This means that Dominicans living in the United States must form an understanding of the Dominican Republic's history while merging that understanding with their own identities as both Dominicans and Americans.

Since cultural identity is not 'an already accomplished fact', but a "'production", which is never complete ... and always constituted within ... representation', according to Hall, new forms of representing—or rather, creating—Dominican diasporic identity are needed to more fully convey the lives of Dominicans living in the United States (222). In *Oscar Wao*, these new forms of representation are mainly Western. Genre literature in particular functions as a way to portray the lives of its characters. Several critics have focused on the idea of genre literature functioning as a way of understanding or representing the Dominican diaspora's experiences. Nonetheless, opinions differ in the matter of which kind of genre literature is the most important. Tim Lanzendörfer, for example, claims that *Oscar Wao's* reinterpretation of Caribbean

history—a history that is integral to understanding the Dominican immigrant community—is ‘completely intelligible *only* if one understands the relevance of its primary fantasy intertext, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55)’.³⁵ He goes on to state that, ‘This is because fantasy is the closest approximation of the truly marvelous nature of the Caribbean’, thus allowing for the Dominican diaspora to ‘recover ... a sense of how to relate to their history’ (Lanzendörfer 127). In contrast to Lanzendörfer, T.S. Miller identifies science fiction as the main tool ‘for Díaz and his characters ... of understanding the world in deep ways—at times, indeed, the only available means of describing human experience’.³⁶ As I have been arguing with the help of Graulund and O’Brien, *Oscar Wao* does not privilege any one genre or piece of fiction as the key to unlocking its meaning. Instead, the novel uses the concept of genre itself to illuminate the experiences of its characters. Miller acknowledges this sentiment when he states that ‘Díaz has not produced a novel about a single marginalized genre, but one that speaks to the entire idea of genres’ (92).

One way the novel uses genre is as a tool for conveying the marginalisation of its characters. For instance, when Yuniór narrates the difficult younger years of Oscar in New Jersey, he poses the rhetorical question: ‘You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smartish bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto’ (23). *The X-Men* (1968-present) is an American comic book series that tells the story of human mutants who use their superpowers to fight evil, but are nevertheless resented by society for being different. Comparing Oscar to an X-Man thus suggests that he is an alienated hero who does good in the world despite being shunned for his physical characteristics and bookishness. Seeing his physical and mental attributes—his skin colour, size and intellect—through the lens of genre fiction therefore transforms them from impediments into figurative super powers, consequently, understanding Oscar as a hero instead of a powerless victim. As this essay has discussed previously, Oscar is often likened to figures from genre literature to emphasise his status as

³⁵ Tim Lanzendörfer. ‘The Marvellous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’. *MELUS*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 127-142, p. 127.

³⁶ T.S. Miller. ‘Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 38, 2011, pp. 92-114, p. 105.

marginal and a 'nerd'. In parallel to Oscar, genre fiction itself is similarly marginalised compared to literary fiction. What is more, genre fiction often tells stories of marginalised characters: *The X-Men*-series, as an example, has often been read as a metaphor for LGBTQ-experiences because its characters struggle with being accepted as they are. Since genre fiction is both marginalised itself and often about marginalisation, it provides a fitting way of understanding Oscar.

By using *The X-Men* to convey Oscar's life, Yuniór is thus positing the notion that genre literature can function as a lens for comprehending the experiences of his community. Oscar himself also seems to hold the belief that genre fiction is a powerful way of illuminating the lives of the diaspora: '[Oscar] was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that was *the kind of story we were all living in*. He'd ask: What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?' [*italics mine*] (6-7). Whom 'we ... all' refers to is not entirely clear, but it is safe to assume that it at least includes Oscar and Yuniór, and arguably the rest of the Dominican immigrant community. Genre literature not only underlines the marginal status of Oscar as a 'nerd' and immigrant, then; it also serves as a way of understanding how he views the world and the position of his diasporic community within it.

While Oscar's love of genre literature signals his alienation, 'these literary tastes are simultaneously a natural outcome and appropriate expression of the peculiar mixture of change and tradition that marks his immigrant experience', according to Daniel Bautista.³⁷ But other than the reasons offered above, why exactly is genre literature such an apt metaphor for Oscar's experience, or a 'natural outcome' of it, as Bautista phrases it? In an extensive footnote early in the novel, Yuniór ponders the connection between genre literature and Oscar's life:

Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly

³⁷ Daniel Bautista. 'Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2010, pp. 41-53, pp. 44-45.

wrenchingly relocated to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I’m guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. (22)

Here, Yunior repeats the idea of Antilleans being closely related to genre literature, and goes on to propose the idea that the connection might stem from being ‘wrenchingly relocated’ to what seems like a different world and time altogether. Travelling to different worlds and times are of course motifs regularly explored in sci-fi and fantasy, but they also have a close connection to postmodern fiction. According to McHale, this is because ‘postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... [w]hat happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?’ (10). Because sci-fi has a long tradition of travelling between different worlds, McHale designates it ‘the key genre which exemplifies the ontologically dominated text’, meaning a text that mainly prompts ontological questions (McHale 34). Thus, Oscar travelling from ‘Third to First’ worlds in a sci-fi-like manner fits McHale’s idea of postmodern fiction asking ontological questions and putting different worlds into confrontation with each other. Genre fiction—specifically sci-fi and fantasy—therefore becomes a lens uniquely adapted to understanding the experience of diaspora since travel between different worlds is such an integral part of their life.³⁸

What is more, the novel suggests that diaspora and genre literature might be connected on a fundamental, even ancestral level. After the passage quoted above, Yunior goes on to suggest that Oscar might have come to love genre fiction for any number of reasons: that is was because he had no friends, or that ‘in the DR he had watched too much *Spider-Man*, been taken to too many Run Run Shaw kung fu movies, listened to too many of his abuela’s spooky stories’ or that the ‘early seventies [were] the dawn of the Nerd Age’ and ‘the libraries of Paterson were so underfunded that they

³⁸ Suggesting that genre fiction, rather than realist fiction, is better suited for understanding the world also fits with the novel’s postmodern aesthetic since it implicitly critiques realist approaches to fiction.

still kept a lot of the previous generation's nerdery in circulation' (22). But despite the narrator's uncertainty, he returns to the idea of genre being fundamentally related to Oscar's identity as a Dominican: 'Or was it something deeper, something ancestral?' (22).

To see why the association between Dominican identity and genre literature is so elemental, it helps to understand the calamitous history of the Dominican Republic itself. Historian David Stannard comments on the inconceivable magnitude of destruction that lies at the foundation of the country as it exists today:

Just twenty-one years after Columbus's first landing in the Caribbean . . . Hispaniola was effectively desolate; nearly 8,000,000 people . . . had been killed by violence, disease, and despair . . . [W]hat happened on Hispaniola was the equivalent of more than fifty Hiroshimas . . . [T]he very effort to describe the disaster's overwhelming magnitude has tended to obliterate both the writer's and the reader's sense of the truly horrific human element.³⁹

In addition to the eradication of the native population, the Spanish imported slaves from Africa which were bred and exploited for centuries. Indeed, Santo Domingo was the first site of both slavery and genocide in the Americas, practices that continued across the two continents for centuries to come.

As Stannard mentions, the scale of the devastation dulls the ability to comprehend its atrocity—it is near impossible to convey such a thing in writing. Because of this, alternate aesthetic forms are needed to capture the vast annihilation that lies at the core of Dominican history. In *Oscar Wao*, those alternate forms consist of viewing the horrors of Dominican history through the lens of genre fiction. Díaz has elaborated on the notion that genre fiction can help communicate these atrocities in an interview:

³⁹ David Stannard. *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. Oxford University Press, 1992, p. x.

[T]he disposable frivolous junk genres are often the best metaphors and the best explanations, and contain most clearly and most beautifully, much of the hidden histories and terrible scars of the New World. You can read all the realistic fiction that you want, all the literary fiction that you want, and never really come close to approximating the horror of belonging to a society that was basically de facto a genocide zone, a place where human beings were bred, a place where human beings were enslaved. But you don't have to go very far in comic books, in science fiction, and fantasy to find these sorts of concerns and these histories, not only on display but writ large.⁴⁰

Díaz's comments explain how genre literature has traditionally been used to write about extremes of experience and how it can therefore provide models and metaphors able to illuminate the horrendous and near phantasmagoric experience of Dominican history, just as it has proved useful in describing marginalisation and travel between worlds.

Finally, the novel combines genre fiction with magical realism to better mediate the history of the Dominican diaspora. Because if its 'fantastical' history and various spiritual traditions such as voodoo, the Caribbean—together with Latin America as a whole—has often been associated with magical realism. Magical realism is defined as a 'kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the "reliable" tone of objective realist rapport'.⁴¹ *Oscar Wao* is not an example of a 'pure' magical realist novel, since it uses many different genres and consistently questions notions of an objective realist approach. Still, there are some vital magical realist elements in the text such as Lola's premonitions, La Inca's healing powers and the mongoose; but perhaps the most important one is the fukú that haunts Oscar's family as well as the larger Caribbean.

The fukú is a recurring motif in the novel, and often acts as a way of understanding not only the individual misfortunes and struggles that the characters

⁴⁰ Marisel Moreno. "'The important things hide in plain sight.'" A conversation with Junot Díaz'. *Latino Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2010, pp. 532-542, p. 541.

⁴¹ Chris Baldick, editor. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford, 2008, www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-683. Accessed 26 Nov. 2017.

experience, but also the larger systemic issues that plague them. Put simply, the fukú serves as a metaphor for colonialism. In this sense, it performs a similar explanatory function to genre fiction in that they both serve to order and explain the lives of the Dominican diaspora. As an example, the novel's opening sentence describes how the fukú was brought about by the Spanish imperial conquest: 'They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos [the native population of the Dominican Republic], uttered just as one world perished and another began' (1). This devastation, the novel suggests, lays the foundation for everything that follows in the history of the Dominican Republic and even the Americas at large, which is why the novel refers to Santo Domingo as the 'Ground Zero of the New World' (1): 'No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since' (1-2).

The fukú also explains one of the darkest chapters of Dominican history: the dictatorship of Trujillo. Trujillo's power is notably described as 'terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined' (*Wao* 2). Again, the novel expresses the sentiment that the horrors of Dominican history are so atrocious that they elude description. Instead, imagination is required in the form of the fantastic, which is why Trujillo is tied to the fukú: 'No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear that he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*' (2). The curse, summoned by the arrival of the Spanish, can thus be traced from the country's genesis to its dictatorship. Since the Dominican diaspora is largely a result of the oppressive Trujillo-regime making the country extremely dangerous to live in, the diaspora can also be understood as a consequence of the curse.⁴² This is presumably why the novel opens by describing the curse that lies at the beginning of Dominican history, because that same curse eventually

⁴² Yunió uses another genre fiction metaphor from to illustrate how hellish life in Trujillo's Dominican Republic was: 'Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor' (233). Mordor is the barren hellscape ruled by the evil Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*.

produced the diaspora which Oscar, Lola and Yunion are a part. As Yunion puts it, 'we are all of us its children' (2).

Of course, belief in the fukú is a superstition, and the novel acknowledges this fact. As Hanna observes, the phrase 'They say' which opens the novel 'signals injection of doubt from the beginning of the first sentence' (502). Likewise, the description of the curse is often accompanied by similar phrases such as 'it is believed' (*Wao* 1). 'The world is full of tragedies enough without niggers having to resort to curses for explanations', as Yunion reflects (159). Despite the novel's reluctance to accept the fukú as fact, it still occupies a prominent part in the narrative because it has such a compelling explanatory function. The text thus suggests that alternate aesthetic forms such as magical realism and genre fiction can offer ways of understanding the world, ways which, while not technically rooted in physical reality, still provide powerful explanations. 'It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions"', Yunion remarks; 'Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you' (6).

By framing the Dominican Republic's history through the lens of genre fiction and combining it with magical realism, thus depicting colonialism as a curse, the novel recreates the past using new tools. In other words, the novel brings Caribbean and Western forms together to create an aesthetic that can better capture the history and lives of the Dominican diaspora. This can also be seen in the novel's two epigraphs which juxtapose a quotation from the American comic book series *Fantastic Four* with Derek Walcott's poem 'The Schooner *Flight*' (1979), thus repeating the pattern of combining Western and Caribbean references established by the novel's title.

In this way, the novel connects both Caribbean and Western, past and present. Consequently, the history of the Dominicans living in the United States is incorporated into their current lives: the fukú that set the diaspora adrift still haunts them. On the surface, the notion of an 'ancestral' Dominican identity hearkens back to Hall's first idea of cultural identity as an ancient essence, since the novel suggests that Caribbeans are prone to understanding the world in magical ways. However, since the ancestral quality takes the form of something new and even futuristic—sci-fi—the resulting notion of identity it creates is malleable and thus more in line with Hall's second

conception of cultural identity as an ever-changing process. This is presumably why Yunior offers the rhetorical question ‘who more sci-fi than us?’ rather than who more magical or supernatural (22). Instead of “digging up” Dominican identity from history, then, *Oscar Wao* reimagines and thus recreates it using a combination of genre fiction and magical realism.

Frantz Fanon, a Caribbean psychiatrist and intellectual renowned for his work on the psychologically damaging effects of colonialism, echoes the idea that cultural identities should not simply be excavated from the past:

We must not ... be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm ... A national culture is not a folk-lore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people's true nature. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which a people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.⁴³

In narrating the story of Oscar and his family, Yunior does what Fanon calls for: he relates the journeys that the characters have undertaken to keep themselves alive; and in doing so he forges a new sense of Dominican diasporic identity that comprises disparate times and worlds. ‘[R]emember’, Yunior tells the reader, ‘Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?’ (155). By narrating the dark past of the Dominican Republic through the optic of genre fiction and magical realism, Yunior manages to shine a light on the extraordinary circumstances that the country's diaspora have survived, thus allowing them to regain a sense of their own fractured past. Ultimately, the intertextual elements of *Oscar Wao* manage to destabilise notions of what a cultural identity is while also suggesting that the identity of the Dominican diaspora can be understood in a way uniquely afforded by alternative forms such as sci-fi, fantasy and magical realism.

⁴³ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1968, p. 188.

Conclusion

Before ending the novel, Yuniór addresses the reader one final time: ‘It’s almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty and retires at last’ (339). With these words, Yuniór again compels the reader to notice his narration—one of the novel’s main postmodern aspects. As Nicol observes, ‘[s]elf-conscious writing ... produces self-conscious reading’ (40). In this sense, postmodern fiction is not only about the way authors write, but how readers read. Nicol therefore suggests that ‘we can conceive of postmodern literary theory and practice as a clarion call not to writers but to readers to do things differently’ (40). Considered in relation to *Oscar Wao*, Nicol’s idea of postmodern fiction fostering self-conscious readers can be seen not only in the way Yuniór addresses readers, but in the novel’s other metafictional elements such as its use of footnotes and internal references to writing. Likewise, the text’s persistent use of fragmentation and mix of intertextual elements also encourages readers to become aware of their process of interpretation.

As has been discussed, the self-aware, critical attitude that postmodern texts tend to promote is often associated with a pessimistic deconstruction of cultural narratives. For example, in the end of *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), Butler delivers his final appraisal of postmodernists:

The best that one can say here, and I am saying it, is that postmodernists are good critical deconstructors, and terrible constructors. They tend to leave that job to those patient liberals in their society who are still willing to attempt to sort out at least some of those differences between truth and fantasy, which postmodernists blur in a whirlwind of pessimistic assumptions about the inevitability of class or psychological conflict. (116)

In contrast to Butler’s polemical contention that ‘postmodernists are good critical deconstructors, and terrible constructors’, Díaz both deconstructs the grand narratives surrounding masculinity and national identity in the Dominican diaspora and attempts to

provide an alternative in the example Oscar sets and the novel's blend of intertextual elements. Rather than taking apart the notion of Dominican-American identity completely, the novel recreates it to comprise not only the history of the country, but the way that history is connected to and understood through Western influences such as genre fiction. Similarly, masculinity is not simply deconstructed and left behind; the novel suggests a new notion of masculinity which emphasises Oscar's affection and care over Yunior's and Trujillo's machismo. The notion that postmodern fiction is necessarily limited to deconstruction seems therefore both incorrect and myopic when applied to *Oscar Wao*.

At the same time that the novel goes against common conceptions of what it means to be a postmodern text, *Oscar Wao* also cannot be said to be a typical example of 'immigrant fiction' despite often being discussed in that context. Similarly to how its characters resist belonging to single categories such as Dominican or American, *Oscar Wao* does not fit any single genre. So while treating the novel as an example of 'immigrant fiction' is somewhat apt since it deals with themes of immigration, such a label alone misses the thoroughly postmodern approach the novel uses to explore those themes. Rather than treating it as another example of 'immigrant fiction', then, approaching the novel as a postmodern work of fiction affords a more complete grasp of the text, since the novel's vision of what it means to be Dominican and living in the United States today hinges on postmodern literary techniques. Undermining myth, opening up history and constructing a new sense of diasporic identity—all three aspects are tied to the novel's postmodern aesthetic. Neglecting to consider the novel's postmodern elements therefore disregards not only its core aesthetic, but needlessly confines the novel to discussions about immigrant literature.

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Appendix: Structure

- Epigraph 1: *The Fantastic Four*
- Epigraph 2: 'The Schooner *Flight*'
- Untitled Prologue 1 (about the fukú) [Yunior narrator]

SECTION I (Atomic Symbol) (~200 pages)

1. GhettoNerd at the End of the World, 1974-1987 (11-52)

[Oscar protagonist, Yunior narrator]

- The Golden Age
- The Moronic Inferno
- Oscar is Brave
- Oscar Comes Close
- Amor de Pendejo
- Oscar in Love

2. Wildwood, 1982-1985 (53-78)

[Lola protagonist, mix of narrators: Yunior in the second person first, then Lola in the first person]

- Contains no subheadings or chapters in contrast to the rest of the text. Begins with italics and uses either a dash or a space and a lack of indent in the next paragraph to indicate a new section.

3. The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral, 1955-1962 (79-172)

[Beli protagonist, Yunior narrator]

- Look at the Princess
- Under the Sea
- La Chica de mi Escuela
- Kimota!
- Número Uno
- Hunt the Light Knight

- Amor!
- El Hollywood
- The Gangster We're All Looking For
- Revelation
- Upon Further Reflection
- Name Game
- Truth and Consequences 1
- Truth and Consequences 2
- In the Shadow of the Jacaranda
- Hesitation
- La Inca, The Divine
- Choice and Consequences
- Fukú vs. Zafa
- Back Among the Living
- La Inca, In Decline
- The Last Days of The Republic

4. Sentimental Education, 1988-1992 (173-207)

[Yunior protagonist and narrator]

- Uses either a dash or a space and a lack of indent in the next paragraph to indicate a new section.

SECTION II (Raised Fist) (~100 pages)

- Epigraph 3: La Nación
- Untitled Prologue 2 (about Lola returning to Paterson) [Lola narrator and protagonist, Yunior narraté]

5. Poor Abelard, 1944-1946 (219-272)

[Abelard protagonist, Yunior narrator]

- The Famous Doctor
- And So?
- Santo Domingo Confidential
- The Bad Thing

- Christe Apocalyptus
- In My Humble Opinion
- The Fall
- Abelard in Chains
- The Sentence
- Fallout
- The Third and Final Daughter
- The Burning
- Forget-me-naut
- Sanctuary

6. The Land of the Lost, 1992-1995 (273-318)

[Oscar protagonist, Yuniór narrator]

- The Dark Age
- Oscar Takes a Vacation
- The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Nativeland
- Evidence of a Brother's Past
- Oscar Goes Native
- La Beba
- A Note From Your Author
- The Girls From Sabana Iglesia
- La Inca Speaks
- Ybón, As Recorded by Oscar
- What Never Changes
- Oscar at the Rubicon
- Last Chance
- Oscar Gets Beat
- Clives to the Rescue
- Close Encounters of the Caribbean Kind
- Dead or Alive
- Briefing for a Descent into Hell
- Alive
- Some Advice
- Paterson, Again

SECTION III (Biohazard Symbol) (~25 pages)

- Untitled Prologue 3 (about Yunion's last time seeing Oscar) (321-323) [Yunion narrator and protagonist]

7. The Final Voyage [no date given] (325-332)

[Oscar protagonist, Yunion narrator]

- Curse of the Caribbean
- The Last Days of Oscar Wao

8. The End of the Story (333-338)

[Yunion protagonist and narrator]

- As For Us
- On a Super Final Note
- The Dreams
- As For Me
- As For Us

- Untitled Epilogue (about Lola's daughter Isis) [Isis protagonist, Yunion narrator] (339-341)

- The Final Letter [Yunion narrator] (343-345)