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# Writing into Silence: Junot Diaz, Human Rights, and the Imperial Curse

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Writing Into Silence: Junot Diaz, Human Rights, and the Imperial Curse

by

Vincent Walsh

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Vincent Walsh

Writing Into Silence: Junot Diaz, Human Rights, and the Imperial Curse

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## Abstract

Junot Diaz employs a variety of postmodernist literary strategies in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, such as conflating (and confusing) the role (and identity) of author and narrator, creating a parallel fictional (and semi-fictional) subtext in the form of numerous, often detailed footnotes, and incorporating a hybrid mixture of discourses throughout a self-referential, apparently self-undermining narrative. Yet by means of his persistent satirical tone, pervasive irony, occasional explicit commentary, and thematic inferences, Diaz simultaneously challenges the core tenets of postmodernist-poststructuralist theory. Diaz's creative concerns interrogate the notion of constructed histories, reestablish distinctions within binaries, and defy the poststructuralist prohibition against grand narratives, while contesting the postmodernist tendency toward moral and cultural relativism. Diaz appears to be consciously inviting a poststructuralist reading, even as he simultaneously undermines any possibility for such a theoretical analysis ever succeeding in fully coming to terms with his work. In effect, Diaz redirects the lens of the postmodernist-poststructuralist perspective back on itself, questioning its basic assumptions. Diaz creates a unique, innovative literary language in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, borrowing tropes from Dominican folklore and popular superstition, mixing in idioms and memes from sci-fi, horror, fantasy, Japanese animes and North American movies, television serials, comic books, hip-hop, and urban diction, in order to tell a story that reawakens repressed memories of historical trauma, and enhances awareness of egregious contemporary injustice. Diaz focuses on the devastating trajectory of the imperialist enterprise in the Western hemisphere since 1492, highlighting the rapacious ideology that ruthlessly engenders this ongoing project of exploitation,

domination, and oppression. In setting private aggrandizement above collective wellbeing, the imperial mentality causes incalculable, completely unnecessary suffering, beginning with genocide against the native population, and extending into the extreme social disparities of the neoliberal present; the predatory practices of this avaricious agenda have become so destructive that they now threaten the very survival of the human species. Ruthless greed is the curse that afflicts us; the only possible counter spell that can save us will be a courageous return to instinctive solidarity, with timely recourse to the healing power of human love.

## Introduction

The discussion of Junot Diaz's fiction that follows, like all arguments in any discipline of the Humanities, proceeds from basic assumptions that it is best, for the sake of clarity, to articulate at the very outset. One crucial premise is that human beings have arrived at an unprecedented crossroads in our history where we face the prospect of imminent self-destruction, as unthinkable as such a grim outcome might be. We have understood for seventy years now the devastating power of our newfound ability to split the atom; the bleak evidence stares back at us from the nightmare memories, and kaiju legacy, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the proliferating cancers and leukemias from Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, along with the escalating crisis at Fukushima. The Cold War may be officially over (although ongoing efforts by the United States to destabilize governments within the former Soviet Union raise obvious questions as to whether that is actually the case), yet nuclear weapons by the thousands still stand poised on hair trigger alert in both East and West, as well as in several other key parts of the globe. The blind compulsion for maximizing limitless profits through continual expansion of world markets has never before been more aggressive or more dangerous; black market proliferation of nuclear materials exacerbates the potential for calamity from unpredictable, essentially unpreventable terrorist attacks.

Adding to the horrifying prospect of nuclear Armageddon, humanity faces potentially irreversible environmental degradation due to global warming, a process that is being driven by reckless, expanding reliance on fossil fuels to meet energy requirements for an exponentially multiplying world population. The destructive effects of climate collapse may soon render human life on this planet unsustainable. With this

grim prospect in mind, earnest efforts are already underway for enabling eventual transport of human beings to other planets in the solar system, where human existence would continue, presumably, by means of artificial life support systems; even if successful, which is far from likely (due to inevitable glitches in any automated system, no matter how sophisticated), these projects could obviously rescue only very few persons, leaving the rest of us stranded, doomed to gradual, agonizing extinction. Devastating weather events have been steadily increasing in frequency and intensity over the past thirty years; excess deaths due to unusual heat waves number nearly half a million across the globe just in the first decade of the twenty-first century alone. Such unendurable spikes in atmospheric temperatures are bound to worsen as fossil fuel emissions increase. Competition for rapidly dissipating natural resources, including water and food, exacerbates already existing international tensions, fomenting civil wars, political instability, and social unrest. Given the unprecedented disruption, chaos, and potential catastrophe presently confronting us, it is no wonder that Junot Diaz resorts to horror, sci-fi, and fantasy for describing the current human predicament in his fiction.

A severely skewed neoliberal economic system, euphemistically described as “globalization,” steadily enriches an increasingly tiny number of individuals, leaving less and less of the planet’s wealth to divide among the rest; hundreds of millions of human beings languish from starvation and severe malnutrition, with hundreds of millions more expiring from easily preventable diseases and the long term effects of degrading, debilitating poverty. This lopsided economic system is an extension of predatory capitalist enterprises that gathered momentum with the onset of European imperialism and the steady expansion of colonialism. Rather than serving human needs and

guaranteeing general prosperity, the neoliberal form of economic organization, like Moloch in ancient Babylon, devours the lower classes to feed the greed-frenzy of privileged ruling elites. The absolutist powers granted through judicial activism to the abstract legal entities that constitute transnational corporations transcend all governmental regulation as well as individual human agency; this self-consuming system finds apt metaphorical expression in the epilogue to Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: "Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?" for the corporation, by definition, functions solely to enhance profits; human life is irrelevant to its impersonal concerns.

The ideological justification for capitalist economics derives from the dubious assumption that ruthless competition -- and the brutal violence that invariably accompanies it -- is both inevitable and necessary in human affairs due to the so-called law of "survival of the fittest," which is supposedly demonstrated in Darwin's theory of evolution -- although this dog-eat-dog notion actually contradicts Darwin's empirical observations. After exhaustive study, both Darwin and Kropotkin separately concluded that mutual cooperation among individual members, rather than destructive rivalry, contains the key to species success and wellbeing. Moreover, contemporary investigation across numerous domains of inquiry indicates the likely existence of a genetic moral faculty in humans that provides all people -- of all ages, races, cultures, and religions -- with an identical intuitive understanding of the basic difference between right and wrong. This innate moral grammar warns us instinctively that the consciously designed, extreme inequalities in wealth distribution that capitalism produces actually represent a major violation of natural law, since such severe discrepancies result in serious harm to the

species. Human beings thrive best while residing in cooperative communities where collective solidarity guarantees essential fairness in financial dealings, ensuring mutual prosperity, along with enduring social harmony.

Despite the world-wide surge in optimism for promoting social justice and human rights that accompanied the defeat of fascism and end of colonialism following World War II, the intervening period since then has witnessed a discouraging return of autocracy, along with a radical decline in quality of life for the vast majority of humanity. These developments have been driven most markedly by the expansionist agenda of the world's sole remaining superpower; the United States enforces its neo-imperial policies by means of high tech militarism, facilitated by global surveillance systems and pervasive state terrorism. Humanity's high hopes for international cooperation and world peace after the founding of the United Nations more than half a century ago have foundered during the current era of tragically renewed, truly unparalleled genocidal exploitation.

As literary critics and intellectuals, it is crucial for us to recognize that our contemporary human dilemma involves first and foremost a crisis of ethics. While we applaud our progress as a species in casting off the binding shackles of prohibitive moral codes imposed by repressive religious doctrines and parochial social conventions, especially in the domain of our inherent sexual freedoms, we need to guard against sweeping moral relativism that considers all questions of ethics as matters only for subjective judgment and individual concern. It does not behoove us to replace restrictive moral codes with reductive cultural relativism, for such a move just leaves us dangling irresolutely between polarities of "our standards are superior to theirs," and "anything goes."

We need to face honestly and resolutely the pressing question of whether there might actually be something fundamentally *wrong* with the fact that billions of human beings suffer from the hopeless misery of degrading poverty, while a select few amass unimaginable fortunes, treasures so vast they could never possibly spend their accumulated riches. We need to ask ourselves how we can justify the claim that our own lives have intrinsic value, while simultaneously implying that those of others do not, and that if other people fail to thrive, or even survive, it is somehow their own fault, or just a matter of inscrutable destiny. We need to ask ourselves how it is that today in Western intellectual culture we commemorate the slaughter of six million human beings during the European holocaust, yet continue to ignore the ongoing murder of six million people, and still counting, in the Congo. Do the black skins of these African victims make their existence somehow less valuable? How far have we progressed morally and culturally beyond the homicidal policies of Belgium's King Leopold II?

These are some of the core moral issues that Junot Diaz challenges people to confront when reading his fiction; he is writing into the silences created by urgent ethical questions that we prefer not to ask, yet that urgently call for adequate answers. For Diaz, it is neither honest nor responsible for us to blame the travesties of the Trujillo dictatorship on the evil nature of just one man; we need to examine the geopolitical system that still supports such despots in order to ensure endless wealth accumulation for self-elected, privileged elites. We should not just complacently accept conventional accounts of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, without also evaluating the genocide that accompanied it, as well as the nightmare lives of hundreds of millions who still suffer from the legacy of that original slaughter today.

David Hirsch disparages the rise of poststructuralism and the emergence of “Theory” after World War II for what he perceives to be its deliberate refusal to confront the moral issues raised by the horrors of Nazi crimes. Hirsch maintains that poststructuralist philosophy’s exclusive focus on the social construction of discourse, and on epistemology and ontology, has enabled its proponents to sidestep and ignore crucial ethical questions related to Nazi ideology; as a result, in his view, Western intellectuals have failed to account adequately for the terrible evils that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century from what we valorize as the very heart of human civilization. Hirsch does not mention that the phenomenon of sophisticated intellectual rationalization, justification, and/or deferral of judgment for horrific crimes committed by Western elites hardly begins with poststructuralism. Hitler’s rise to power was enabled by brutalizing sanctions imposed on Germany by France and England after World War I, which was itself the result of ruthless competition among imperial powers for access to the spoils of destructive capitalist exploitation of the entire globe. Nor does Hirsch consider the theoretical justifications for systematic genocide proposed by highly regarded nineteenth century intellectuals such as Joseph-Ernest Renan and John Stuart Mill.

As literary critics and intellectuals, we face responsibility for addressing the ethical issues raised by official government policies and practices of our day. In that regard, another crucial assumption of this study is that the genetically endowed moral faculty that all human beings share supports basic ethical principles such as those articulated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which operates from the premise that all human beings are born with an innate, inalienable right to enjoy a reasonable quality of life. Following this assumption, logically, one would presume there



must be universal validity for basic principles of social justice, as well, deriving from natural law, and mandating forms of economic organization that redistribute the wealth of the planet equitably and fairly among all peoples; such arrangements are obviously a requirement for establishing social stability and ensuring world peace. Formulating workable redistributive economic models is still, quite obviously, very much a work in progress; no single theoretical formula will suffice for facilitating innovative paradigms' eventual implementation.

In order to pull back in time from the edge of the yawning abyss of self-annihilation, we will first have to awaken to the fact that human beings comprise a single biological family, one that traces back to a common ancestry among a small breeding group in Africa approximately 50,000 years ago, when the capacity for human language initially emerged. Based on that recognition, we will need to develop forms of political and social organization that enable us to function cooperatively and harmoniously for the benefit of the entire human community. Programs for attaining these ideals are still also very much a work in progress, although tentative models exist, and the basic concepts have been understood (and put into practice in varying ways, and with varying degrees of success) throughout human history. It is not a question so much of whether we can ever succeed in realizing such lofty goals, or whether such goals are even attainable, for eventual success of some kind or other is essential for ensuring human survival. To contemplate or predict failure, in effect, is to accept inevitable self-destruction. One fact, at least, is crystal clear by now: the violent competition that has marred our collective experience so far is no longer sustainable, and is therefore unacceptable. Common sense alone tells us this.

Another core assumption for this discussion is that there are, in fact, practical steps we can take toward resolving our current dilemma, and that the way forward is effectively communicable, however incompletely or imperfectly, by means of human beings' unique, universally shared ability to use language. Our language capacity, like our inborn moral faculty, is genetically endowed, and governed by a universal grammar. The apparent differences among various human languages are only superficial; a visitor from outer space would conclude that all humans essentially speak just one language, with only barely discernible differences. Moreover, since human language capacity is innate, it cannot be said to derive from socialization alone, as poststructuralists and many cognitive psychologists today typically claim. Empirical observation reveals that children learn and utilize language far more efficiently and effectively than their actual experience of language can begin to explain.

Another important corollary of the existence of a universal grammar for language acquisition is that we are not simply constructed by language as subjects, as poststructuralists insist; language does not exist outside and independent of us as unique persons. As well as a skill learned through interaction with others, language is an innately acquired, self-generating capacity that enables us to think for ourselves; our thoughts are not simply constructions of a language that becomes imprinted on us from outside. Furthermore, while language is hardly representational, this does not suggest that the meanings that language conveys are necessarily indeterminable. Language is infinitely creative, since words often suggest layers of nuance (within certain limits), yet individual words are not infinitely iterable, as Derrida famously claimed. That is to say, words do not inevitably denote their own opposite meanings; sentences do not invariably

undermine or “deconstruct” themselves, so that they can be construed as simultaneously intending the opposite sense of what they apparently express. Thus all binary oppositions -- such good and evil, oppressor and oppressed -- cannot be simply reduced to some vague, indefinite, subjectively perceived in-between space, clouded by uncertainty and ambiguity.

Once it is understood that language capacity and language learning are not merely products of socialization, moreover, it becomes apparent that all verbal formulations cannot be simply reduced to essentially indistinguishable, subjectively constructed narratives, mere fictions that we have no objective criterion for evaluating with regard to their relative accuracy or validity. Nor can abstract terms such as “reason” and “science” be simply dismissed as vain, futile efforts at describing non-existent “transcendental signifieds,” nor can all historical accounts be discounted as just subjective constructs, and therefore necessarily incomplete, uncertain, and suspect. Moral and ethical principles, likewise, cannot be simply dismissed as merely relative, since such principles can often be shown -- as with the universal moral grammar, and basic human rights -- to have verifiable validity, applicability, and crucial relevance.

These generalizations about poststructuralism might create the impression of proposing a straw man argument, but that is not at all the purpose or point of this discussion; rather, the central concern here focuses on whether or not we can say anything coherent or meaningful at all about Junot Diaz’s fiction -- or about any language statement, for that matter. If everything one says or writes is dictated by language that exists independent and outside of us, and if everything one says or writes necessarily undermines or deconstructs itself even in the moment of its expression, if all words

contain their opposite meanings, and all binary oppositions automatically dissolve into ambiguity, then the only real sense we can make of any statement or text is that it ultimately makes no sense. The only authority one can rely on is the omniscient literary critic who insists that there is no authority. Yet the critic who makes such a claim is obviously assuming authority for doing so, which involves a fundamental contradiction. We become trapped in a circular argument, and wind up in an intellectual cul-de-sac. The only certainty we have is that meaning inevitably remains ambiguous and uncertain. One of the most unfortunate aspects of such an approach is that it places the critic in an apparently superior position with respect to the writer of the text that the critic is called upon to evaluate. The critic has the last word; he or she alone can decide what a text is saying, and how it is saying it. More importantly, he or she can decide that the text is not saying anything we need to take seriously at all.

This is not to argue that literary critics collectively subscribe to a particular set of theoretical doctrines, or that they somehow all agree to undergo a rigorous brainwashing process that certifies them as card carrying “poststructuralists.” Yet Derrida’s ideas about indeterminacy and iterability, along with his concept of deconstruction, have become widely accepted notions that are casually asserted as if they are generally understood. One encounters other concepts associated with poststructuralist theory that are likewise typically presented as givens, and therefore implicitly regarded as unchallengeable: the prohibition against “grand narratives,” for example, along with the pivotal significance of terms like “hybridity,” “mimicry,” “ambivalence,” and “a third space for enunciation,” as well as cautions against “essentializing” and “exoticizing.” All of these theoretical perspectives surely raise interesting issues, yet it seems problematic that their pertinence

tends to be just taken for granted. Proponents of these positions, ironically, seem to end up challenging one form of authority by simply substituting another.

For the sake of clarifying the argument in this discussion, then, it is important to understand that this reading perceives Diaz as offering a particular, quite coherent and purposeful historical background for his novel -- regardless of prohibitions against “grand narratives” -- as well as a definite geopolitical context for his short stories that is firmly grounded in ethical principles that support social justice and human rights. Diaz’s fiction incorporates all of the grave concerns for humanity’s fate described in the opening pages of this introduction. By way of contextualizing our present predicament, Diaz portrays the arrival of Columbus in the New World as an unmitigated disaster for the native population. Contrary to the current critical consensus, Diaz expresses no ambivalence in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (although there surely is complexity and nuance) regarding the curse that was inflicted on comparatively innocent Native American communities by homicidal conquistadors driven insane with rapacious greed. Furthermore, Diaz makes it quite obvious that the fuku released by the Admiral, like an evil genie from a holy water bottle, traces an obvious trajectory down through the centuries to Trujillo and then on to Demon Balaguer. Since the fuku works its malicious effects by means of extreme violence, along with crushing economic pressure, it is hardly surprising to discover its manifestations within individual characters in the narrative as well, especially Yuniors, who in certain ways seems like just another clone for El Jefe. The fuku can be considered a metaphor for predatory capitalism, with all its attendant evils, a pervasive malice that affects the daily lives of us all.

Junot Diaz brings the suffering of the disenfranchised painfully alive in his poignant depictions of impoverished rural peasants and hard pressed factory workers in the Dominican Republic, along with struggling immigrants fighting to survive oppressive conditions in the United States. The exploitation of countless women driven by dire need into strip clubs and prostitution is yet another manifestation of the extreme social dysfunction and widespread tragedy that results from an economic system designed solely for the benefit of elites. Men's chronic violence against women -- and also against each other -- along with the pervasive neglect and abuse of children, are just further consequences of the desperation and despair that follows from overwhelming stress due to incessant, frenzied competition. The entire human society, both in the Dominican Republic and the United States, is hierarchically structured, like the pecking order on a poultry farm, so that self-esteem and personal dignity end up the scarcest of commodities. The so-called law of the jungle that prevails everywhere takes on extreme forms of savagery that not even wild beasts would abide.

Images of nuclear destruction in Diaz's fiction portray apocalyptic living conditions, where hunger and violence join hands with a pandemic of drug addiction; the brutality of thugs in Caribbean cane fields mirrors bone breaking beat downs by New Jersey State Police. Half a millennium may separate Spanish conquistadors from contemporary Santo Domingo barrios and New Brunswick ghetto streets, but the general misery in each of these historical periods reveals comparable degrees of desolation, even if victims today remain mostly invisible, while facile sophism silences their screams. Junot Diaz combines the ineffable influence of literary language with the compelling eloquence of carefully crafted prose in a writing style that rocks like hip-hop and reads

like poetry; his fiction arouses the sleeping conscience of humanity, awakens our better instincts and evokes our higher nature. Junot Diaz reminds us that we belong to one human family, and that, following the example of Oscar Wao, we can conjure a counter spell for the curse of greed and violence -- the healing magic of human love.

## Postcolonialism and Human Rights: An Ethical Universal

Postmodernist discourse aspires to transcend traditional conceptual formulations and unsatisfactory intellectual perspectives in order to enable deeper, more accurate and revealing cultural analyses. Yet the term “postmodern” carries different meanings for various individuals who describe themselves as postmodernists. For some, postmodernism correlates with poststructuralism’s insistence on the social construction of language, along with its radical critique of Enlightenment idealism and rationalism, and its persistent interrogation of theoretical binaries. For others, postmodernism primarily involves radical experimentation with aesthetic form as a means of disrupting and subverting traditional avenues of expression and understanding. In either case, postmodernists strive to reconfigure conventional models of cognitive reflection on and interpretation of linguistic expression as well as lived human experience. The pressing question remains, nonetheless, whether postmodernist poststructuralism subverts and undermines the progressive possibilities of social justice discourse.

As Kwame Anthony Appiah has demonstrated, postmodernism and postcolonialism actually constitute two distinct critical practices, since Western postmodernists often ignore or minimize the pervasive social injustice associated with colonial and imperial policies.<sup>1</sup> Junot Diaz refers to this issue in an essay describing the devastating consequences of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, where he challenges “the colossal denial energies (the veil) that keep most third-world countries (and their

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<sup>1</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991):336-57.



problems) out of global sightlines” (2)<sup>2</sup> This denial stems, in part, from the fact that Western postmodernists, despite their rejection of binary oppositions, still tend to represent the Third World as Other; this is Aijaz Ahmad’s criticism of Fredric Jameson when the latter argues for a “global American postmodernist culture” (65), and insists that all Third World literatures must necessarily entail national allegories.<sup>3</sup> Ahmad contends that Jameson’s argument, ironically, remains “centrally grounded in a binary opposition between a first and a third world,” regardless of its postmodernist pretensions; according to Ahmad, Jameson assumes the validity of a “unitary determination” (23) that “conceals its own ideology,” and thus continues a totalizing description by which “colonial discourse was able to classify and ideologically master the colonial subject” (5-6).

Ahmad argues that Jameson presumes the inevitable preeminence of a capitalist world economic order, ignoring the viability of any socialist alternative. Yet in Ahmad’s view, “the only nationalisms in the so-called third world which have been able to resist US cultural pressure . . . are the ones . . . within the much larger field of socialist political practice” (8).<sup>4</sup> The question of whether some form of democratic socialist alternative remains a viable option for formerly colonized societies -- and perhaps even human societies generally -- in an increasingly globalized world order, remains a crucial one, not only with regard to issues of social and economic justice, but for human survival itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Diaz, Junot. “Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal.” *Boston Review* May/June 2011. <[http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.3/junot\\_diaz\\_apocalypse\\_haiti\\_earthquake](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.3/junot_diaz_apocalypse_haiti_earthquake)>

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, Fredric. “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad, Aijaz. “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory.’” *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25.

With so much at stake, Ahmad considers it only natural and inevitable that “socialism is . . . a resistance that saturates the globe today” (8).

Junot Diaz’s fiction certainly represents postmodernist work, in the sense that the author refers, directly or indirectly, to virtually all the critical tropes associated with that school of literary criticism; at the same time, however, Diaz also employs tropes associated with postcolonialism. Yet like the term postmodern, “postcolonial” suggests multiple frames of significance. Arif Dirlik asserts that the dominant trends in contemporary postcolonial discourse derive chiefly from Third World intellectuals who, as members of First World academe, have adopted European postmodernist-poststructuralist linguistic and epistemological assumptions. These poststructuralist-postcolonialists abjure master narratives, and strive, according to Dirlik: “to achieve an authentic globalization of cultural discourse . . . The goal, indeed, is no less than to abolish all distinctions between center and periphery and all other ‘binarisms’ that are allegedly a legacy of colonial(ist) ways of thinking and to reveal societies globally in their heterogeneity and contingency” (329).<sup>5</sup>

It seems ironic that poststructuralist-postcolonial theorists would assume a form of Eurocentric discourse that Dirlik describes as having “universalistic epistemological pretensions” (342) in order to interrogate and subvert the universalizing presumptions of imperial-colonial Eurocentrism. By focusing exclusively on the local and particular, on “heterogeneity and contingency,” these poststructuralist-postcolonial critics, in effect, seem to be substituting one form of master narrative for another; according to Dirlik,

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<sup>5</sup> Dirlik, Arif. “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism and the Age of Global Capitalism.” *Critical Inquiry* 20.2 (1994): 328-356.

“Postcolonialism’s repudiation of structure and totality in the name of history ironically ends up not in an affirmation of historicity but in a self-referential, universalizing historicism that reintroduces through the back door an unexamined totality” (345).

Ahmad further contends that, in their repudiation of master narratives, poststructuralist-postcolonial theorists reject the idea that capitalism has played a foundational role in the history of imperialism and colonialism, and deny that it still largely determines living conditions in postcolonial societies today: “postcolonial critics have been silent on the relationship of the idea of postcolonialism to its context in contemporary capitalism; indeed, they have suppressed the necessity of considering such a possible relationship by repudiating a foundational role to capitalism in history” (331). Yet this perspective would entail ignoring the critical influence of capitalist ideology in shaping world affairs, as well as the crucial factor of global power relations and the inescapable impact of concrete material fact in every day human life. There can be no doubt that capitalism, both in its historical and contemporary forms, produces extreme economic inequalities, disparities that can only be enforced and sustained by means of overwhelming violence. Dirlik contends that poststructuralist-postcolonial criticism promotes “diversion of attention from problems of social, political, and cultural domination;” thus it would seem that poststructuralist-postcolonialist theory fails to even address, much less attempt to account for, the widespread human misery that is the inevitable, entirely predictable, and far from unintended consequence of capitalist ideological practice, past as well as present.

As Dirlik points out, however, the designation postcolonial can also be said to refer, quite simply, to “conditions in formerly postcolonial societies” (331), which is how

the term should be understood, it immediately becomes apparent, as it is used in describing the work of postcolonial writers like Junot Diaz. Kwame Anthony Appiah maintains that African writers of the first generation after independence borrowed the concept of the nation-state from imperial discourse and transplanted it onto African experience, not realizing that this would lead them to internalize the dominant discourse of the West, and thus inadvertently facilitate neo-colonial/neo-imperial oppression and control of their newly liberated societies. According to Appiah, second generation postcolonial African writers, in contrast, “reject not only the Western *imperium* but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie,” understanding that the postcolonial “project of legitimization cannot be the postmodern one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal . . . an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years” (353). Yet the notion of an “ethical universal,” or any universal whatsoever, remains antithetical to postmodernism, since postmodernist (that is, poststructuralist) theory abjures universals. The relatively comfortable lifestyle of Western intellectuals may promote a sense of resigned complacency with regard to intensifying misery in the Third World, yet Appiah insists that this is hardly acceptable to postcolonial writers in Africa; nor does it seem acceptable to Junot Diaz, who makes obvious efforts to call attention to the ongoing degradation and debasement of formerly colonized people, many of them of African descent, in the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Various tropes in Western discourse have been traditionally employed to justify the mercantile, colonial, and imperial projects of the past half-millennium. Europe’s gradual domination of the globe began with voyages of exploration and discovery in the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, transitioned into the mercantilist project of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (marking the onset of colonialism), and then morphed into the age of classical imperialism, which began in 1880 and lasted until World War I -- the deadly culmination of fierce rivalries among imperial powers during the preceding thirty-odd years. Throughout this period, Western intellectuals typically relied on arbitrary presumptions of racial superiority, and employed self-justifying terminology -- “discovery,” “primitivism,” “cannibalism,” “idealization” (of the sanguinary benefits of “civilization” for eliminating “savagery”), “exoticism,” “surveillance,” “appropriation,” “debasement,” “negation,” “affirmation,” and so on, to rationalize violent domination and exploitation of the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> In order for postcolonial thinkers to interrogate such rhetoric, and challenge this dominant ideology successfully, Appiah insists, they must articulate a compelling universal ethic that firmly supports recognizable principles of social justice.

The fact that a universal ethic of the kind Appiah recommends can actually be realized should not be in doubt. Only in relatively rare cases of extreme pathology do human beings ever boast that they willfully, consciously cause unnecessary harm to others just because they can, or want to, or because they derive perverse pleasure from doing so. Even Adolf Hitler felt constrained to rationalize and justify his malevolent program of mass extermination and genocide, which he waged so relentlessly and heartlessly not only against Jews, but also against the Romani, the handicapped, and Slavs generally -- all those he and his cohorts arbitrarily deemed to be inferior to the

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<sup>6</sup> Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham: Duke U P, 1993.

“master race.” Nazi ideology found fertile resources in Anglo-Saxon and European claims of white supremacy, Herbert Spencer’s theory of social Darwinism, as well as rhetorical appeals in the name of “progress” and “civilizing mission,” all of which proved so convenient for rationalizing imperialism’s atrocities. Under the guise of revised and newly contrived ideological formulations, similar and even worse travesties continue unabated into the present. The very fact that such crimes must be continuously rationalized in order to appear justified implies innate, instinctive human revulsion at their occurrence.

The horrors of World War II awakened the shocking realization among global societies that humankind had at last achieved sufficient technological capacity to ensure self-annihilation; collective dismay over this fact led to the formation of the United Nations, whose primary mission was to prevent such an insane, self-destructive outcome. A crucial component of the UN Charter, the Declaration of Human Rights, represents collaborative effort on the part of renowned moral philosophers and legal experts from around the world, who gathered together for the express purpose of articulating a set of universal ethical principles that would guide and ground the UN’s function; this Declaration serves well as a working basis for the type of universal ethic that Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests.

Central to this document are two key notions: that every human life has worth and is of equal value, and that ensuring both the quality and viability of human life must be the fundamental mandate of international law. The Declaration explicitly refers to “the inherent dignity and . . . equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,” including the right to live together in peace, and enjoy “freedom from fear and

want.” Human beings “are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards each other in a spirit of brotherhood . . . without distinction of any kind.” This historic document also asserts unequivocally that every person possesses the inalienable right “to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work,” as well as “favorable remuneration ensuring . . . an existence worthy of human dignity.” The Declaration specifies that each individual “has the right to a standard of living adequate for . . . health and well-being . . . including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other circumstances beyond his control.”<sup>7</sup>

The principles articulated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights derive from a rich tradition of moral deliberation dating back many centuries, which probably explains why the experts who had gathered found themselves, to their collective surprise and relief, arriving at such ready and rapid agreement regarding its core provisions when they began composing the initial draft. Western philosophers from Aristotle to Aquinas, through Enlightenment figures such as David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith, had confidently argued for the existence of universal, instinctively understood moral laws that govern the conduct of human affairs, as had numerous thinkers down through the ages in the East.

Scientific investigation seems to confirm these philosophical conclusions. Charles Darwin’s empirical observations convinced him that human beings possess an innate moral faculty, and that an intuitive sense of right and wrong, along with a capacity for

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

feeling remorse of conscience, is the single most important difference between humans and other animals. Darwin found that this moral sense in humans has clear antecedents in the social instincts of other animals, which include a strong desire for companionship, anguish at isolation, collaboration in meeting basic needs and organizing for self-protection, as well as clear manifestations of mutual affection, sympathy, empathy, and compassion. Contrary to the distortions of social Darwinism, Darwin concluded that individual members of a successful species act not only in terms of self-interest, but also from instinctive concern for the goals, needs, and interests of the species at large. So powerfully compelling were these impressions, indeed, that Darwin became convinced that his observations could only lead to the conclusion that there is an intrinsic basis in nature, and particularly among humans, for adherence to the Golden Rule.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, there seems to be convincing empirical evidence that confirms the UN Declaration's assumption that human beings are actually members of a single human family. Contemporary science suggests that the seven billion-plus people currently populating the planet descend directly from one small breeding group of humans who lived in East Africa roughly 50,000 years ago; this would mean that all human beings living on the planet today share an identical core genetic inheritance, a fact that would indeed make us all family members, biologically speaking, despite our numerous apparent, wide-ranging differences. According to renowned paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall, it also appears that a single genetic mutation occurred in one member of this original breeding group "that set the stage for language acquisition . . . [this mutation]

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<sup>8</sup> Darwin's conclusions were confirmed and reinforced in Peter Kropotkin's study, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). Republished in 2008 by Forgotten Books. [www.forgottenbooks.org](http://www.forgottenbooks.org).



depended on the phenomenon of emergence, whereby a chance combination of preexisting elements results in something totally unexpected,” and thus can only be described as a “sudden and emergent event . . . [which] probably had nothing whatever to do with adaptation.”<sup>9</sup> Noam Chomsky has found that there is

good evidence that language capacity is the same for all human groups . . .

there are individual differences, but no known group differences. It follows that there has been no meaningful evolutionary change with regard to language since the time our ancestors, perhaps a very small group, left Africa and spread around the world; about 50,000 years ago it is commonly assumed. Somewhere in that narrow window, there seems to have been a sudden explosion of creative activity, complex social organization, symbolic behavior of various kinds.<sup>10</sup>

This language capacity, like the capacity for moral intuition, seems to be a uniquely human characteristic within the animal kingdom.

Since empirical evidence suggests that there is a common ancestry for the human race, as well as a universal grammar for language acquisition, it is reasonable to assume that human beings share the same basic nature as family members, as the UN Declaration asserts. Common ancestry also suggests a universally shared understanding of intrinsic human rights, which constitute ontologically grounded principles of social justice.

Current scientific investigation seems to verify the existence of a genetically endowed “universal moral grammar” in human beings comparable to the universal grammar for

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in “Language and Other Cognitive Systems: What is Special about Language?” Language Development Symposium, Boston University, November, 2010 (footnote #6).

<sup>10</sup> Language Development Symposium, Boston University, November, 2010, p.7.

language acquisition. In a recent study, John Mikhail describes research demonstrating that 90-95% of respondents across broad multicultural samples typically produce consistently identical answers to standard moral problems.<sup>11</sup> These results suggest that all people share uniform intuitive judgments concerning basic issues of right and wrong; it is particularly striking that none of the respondents can explain how they arrive at their intuitive moral conclusions. Mikhail draws a parallel between his findings and human language acquisition, and concludes that intuitive moral judgments must similarly depend on a genetically endowed cognitive faculty that is the same in all persons, regardless of age, sex, education, race, ethnic or religious background, or other differentiating factors. Ongoing research suggests that this intrinsic moral grammar is neither learned nor socially determined (although it is socially influenced), but instead is universal as well as innate.

The challenge for researchers, according to Mikhail, is to draw meaningful conclusions for:

how people manage to compute a full structural description of the relevant action that incorporates properties like ends, means, side effects and *prima facie* wrongs, such as battery, even when the stimulus contains no direct evidence for these properties. This is a distinct poverty of stimulus problem, similar in principle to determining how people manage to recover a three-dimensional representation from a two-dimensional stimulus in the theory of vision. . . . Although each of these operations is

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<sup>11</sup> Mikhail, John. *Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2011.

relatively simple in its own right, the overall length, complexity and abstract nature of these computations, along with their rapid, intuitive and at least partially inaccessible character lends support to the hypothesis that they depend on innate, domain-specific algorithms. (146, 148)<sup>12</sup>

Results from ongoing research in multiple domains thus far, including cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, developmental and social psychology, animal studies, experimental philosophy, comparative linguistics, legal anthropology, deontic logic, and comparative law, among others, while still inconclusive and controversial, seem to support the theory that there is indeed an organic, genetically endowed human capacity for distinguishing between right and wrong, one that operates consistently across all cultures, and throughout all stages of human development.

Based on the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is, in fact, an ontological basis for a universal ethic to which postcolonial writers, and human beings generally, can validly appeal in their collective efforts to challenge imperial, colonial, as well as neoliberal discourse, a universal ethic that serves to establish recognizable norms of social justice that are firmly grounded in international law. Such a comprehensive ethical framework supplies a sound theoretical basis for interrogating the history of imperialism, and concomitant colonialism, which together constitute a sustained project of economic expansionism enforced by organized violence. The natural human impulses which inspired early voyages of exploration and discovery could have led to the establishment of reciprocal trade arrangements and cultural exchange among peoples that

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<sup>12</sup> Mikhail, John. "Universal Moral Grammar: Theory, Evidence and the Future." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11.4 (2007): 143-152.

would have ensured mutual benefit and equitable enrichment for all concerned. European elites, however, clearly disdained the idea of sharing the world. Justified by militant Christian ideology, European powers relied instead on superior military technology, employed with completely unscrupulous ruthlessness, in order to secure exclusive advantage and gain unassailable private privilege.

The inevitable, and far from unintended, consequence of such a comprehensive program was genocide on an unimaginable scale. Tens of millions of human beings fell victim to a rapacious greed that recognized no ethical restraints whatsoever, while the conquerors persisted in justifying their vicious actions as conforming to “God’s will,” reflecting the inevitable and necessary order of geopolitical affairs. Wholesale slaughter of subject peoples deemed unsuitable for being worked to death as slaves became the order of the day, simply because they stood in the way. Conveniently, most of the subjugated populations proved to be darker hued, so that white racist dogma could be employed to reinforce extremist religious doctrine in rationalizing the extermination of idolatrous pagans as well as genetic inferiors. Nazism did not arise in an historical vacuum; even though the vast majority of its victims were white, they were understood to be subhuman types.

Western intellectuals can only honestly account for their present privileged status by confronting the crimes against humanity that created -- and continue to enable -- such privilege, which requires radical interrogation of the facile ideologies that are typically employed to rationalize and justify these crimes. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith pointedly observes:

To consider indigenous peoples as not fully human, or not human at all, enabled distance to be maintained and justified various policies of either extermination or domestication. Some indigenous peoples ('not human') were hunted and killed like vermin, others ('partially human') were rounded up and put in reserves like creatures to be broken in, branded and put to work.<sup>13</sup>

Ideology functions as a powerful tool for refuting and discounting the precepts of innate moral principles. Depicting people whom one intends to exploit and take advantage of as being somehow qualitatively different, as constituting the "Other," invariably serves as a convenient pretext for rationalizing barbarity and justifying atrocity.

As the contemporary record amply demonstrates, such crimes are by no means confined to the past. Linda Smith reminds us that "there is unfinished business . . . we are still being colonized . . . we are still waiting for justice" (108). The United States, emerging as the preeminent global economic and military power by far at the end of World War II (the Soviet "threat" that produced the Cold War merely served as a convenient pretext for ongoing imperial expansionism), has consistently prevented the United Nations from performing its global peacekeeping mission and fulfilling its mandate to protect and ensure fundamental human rights -- lofty rhetoric about "democracy promotion" notwithstanding. Military planners in Washington demonstrate assiduous determination in persistently blocking efforts to establish actual democracy and achieve social justice in the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East,

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. "Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory." *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005. 94-115.

because assuring the common good within these countries would inevitably constrain transnational corporate profits. Precise figures remain difficult to verify, since the powerful prefer not to count their victims, but it is reasonable to estimate that the Korean War produced two-to-three million corpses, the Vietnam War four million more; one million were killed in 1965 alone as a result U.S. sponsored political violence in Indonesia. Hundreds of thousands were slain throughout Latin America during the ensuing decades. U.S.-supported depredations by South Africa's apartheid regime in Mozambique and Angola caused one-and-a-half million deaths; only troops sent to Angola by socialist Cuba prevented Washington from realizing its maximal imperialist agenda in that ravaged country.

Current neo-imperial practice has precipitated U.S. military aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, leaving one million or more dead and both countries in ruins. Neoliberal economic policies continue to promote vicious exploitation in the Congo that has led to the violent deaths of six-and-a-half million peasants since the turn of the century, facilitating the rape of natural resources for the benefit of Western technology corporations. One out of seven billion human beings living on the planet today are either starving or severely malnourished, amidst food surpluses that are hoarded by transnational agribusiness corporations to ensure escalating profits. Hundreds of thousands of human beings, mostly little children, die each year from easily treatable diseases, while Western pharmaceutical companies prevent access to affordable medicines. Multinational energy corporations continue to pump deadly fossil fuel emissions into the atmosphere, despite an overwhelming scientific consensus that warns of imminent environmental catastrophe; nuclear missiles and laser weapons capable of

destroying the planet many times over stand poised on high alert, ready to protect Western corporate interests.

Stuart Hall's claim that the Holocaust of the 1930s and 40s in Europe constitutes "one of the few world-historical events comparable in barbarity to that of modern slavery" (545)<sup>14</sup> is highly misleading, for Hall ignores the ongoing holocausts generated by neo-imperial practices today, as well as the comparable barbarities of sweat shop, sub-minimalist wage slavery characteristic of contemporary corporate employment practices. Hall also fails to account for the pervasive, brutal political repression that enforces severely regressive neoliberal policies on already radically marginalized human beings, who naturally rebel against continuing denial of their basic human rights. The ongoing genocide in the Congo alone already rivals, and threatens to surpass, the European Holocaust's terrible human toll. Furthermore, survival of the human species itself is now increasingly threatened by the reckless irresponsibility of corporate-financial greed, firmly backed by the United States military machine and associated NATO forces that enable and supports its amoral excesses.<sup>15</sup>

The global scale of the ongoing neo-imperial genocide staggers the imagination. According to Andre Vltchek:

Between 50 and 55 million people have died around the world as a result of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism since the end of World War

II. This relatively short period has arguably seen the greatest number of

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<sup>14</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Thinking the Diaspora: Home Thoughts from Abroad." *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005. 543-560.

<sup>15</sup> For detailed background on direct U.S. complicity in the ongoing Congo genocide see Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

massacres in human history. Most of them were performed in the name of lofty slogans such as freedom and democracy. A handful of European nations and those governed mainly by citizens of European descent have been advancing Western interests -- the interests of the people who ‘matter’ -- against those of the great majority of humanity. The slaughter of millions has been accepted and seen as inevitable and even justifiable. And the great majority of the Western public appears to be frighteningly badly misinformed. Along with the 55 million or so people killed as a direct result of wars initiated by the West, pro-Western military coups and other conflicts, hundreds of millions have died indirectly, in absolute misery, and silently. Such global arrangements are rarely challenged in the West, and even in the conquered world it is often accepted without any opposition.<sup>16</sup>

Peoples and cultures of the world may well be intermixing today more than ever before, due to what Hall describes as the “heterogeneity of the global market and the centripetal force of the nation state” (550), and this can only be regarded as a positive development, for human beings everywhere are, after all, members of a single global family. But actual economic power remains highly centralized, even as it becomes ostensibly more diversified.<sup>17</sup> The unconscionable gap between a tiny global plutocracy, those the London *Financial Times* unabashedly refers to as “the masters of the universe,”

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<sup>16</sup> Vltchek, Andre and Noam Chomsky. *On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare*. London: Pluto Press, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Nolan, Peter. *Is China Buying the World?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. See also: Martin Wolf. “Why China Will Not Buy the World.” *Financial Times*: 7. July 10 2013. ProQuest. Web. 17 July 2013 <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1399181990?accountid+12043>



and the vast majority of humanity continues to widen; income inequalities have been exacerbated even more rapidly since the 2008 recession. Global poverty levels continue to increase precipitously, including within wealthy countries, threatening any chances for reasonable quality of life for literally billions of people. Economic disparity has widened to the point where one can now only regard most human beings living on the planet today, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, as colonized, or marginalized, under a globalized system of state-transnational-corporate hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

Derek Wolcott naively assumes that Caribbean peoples “live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign” (257).<sup>19</sup> Washington, D.C., through corporate friendly trade agreements, and the global reach of the I.M.F. and World Bank that it controls, enforces neoliberal policies on Caribbean islands that continue to drive workers’ wages downward and simultaneously subvert social spending, while undermining job security and workplace safety. In the neoliberal framework, profits matter far more than people -- more, even, than prospects for sustainable human life itself. Throughout Latin America, notes William I. Robinson, “capitalist globalization has . . . wreaked havoc on the environment;” economic doctrines enforce “a neoliberal hegemony, privatizing, liberalizing, deregulating . . . cheapening labor, and implementing fiscal austerity, free trade, and investment regimes” that have produced “unprecedented social inequalities, mass unemployment, the immiseration and displacement of tens, if not hundreds of

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<sup>18</sup> For further detail on increasingly extreme global economic inequality see Fuentes-Nieves, Ricardo and Nick Galasso. “Working for the Few: Political Capture and Economic Inequality.” Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive. ISBN 978-1-78077-540-1. Cowley, Oxford, IX4 2JY, UK. January 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Wolcott, Derek. “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005. 257-264.

millions.”<sup>20</sup> Viewed from the perspective of a half-millennium, it is obvious that not much has changed on the world geopolitical stage; in fact, living conditions for the vast majority of formerly colonized peoples are steadily becoming significantly worse. Wolcott’s assertion that in the Caribbean, “history is irrelevant . . . it has never mattered . . . what has become necessary is imagination” (259) sidesteps the decisive impact of economic fact. This is not to discount the significance or crucial importance of imagination, for culture surely transcends issues of mere subsistence, and enables people to realize their full potential as human beings. It is certainly the case that man does not live by bread alone. Yet without bread, people do not live at all.

Frederic Jameson argues that in Western culture there tends to be a:

radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between . . . the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and . . . the public world of classes, of the economic . . . a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existence is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics (69),

so that we often fail to account for the actual, profound, and inescapable interpenetration of the public and private spheres, and the direct correlation between economic circumstances and existential living conditions. The suggestion of an “economic science” involved in all of this betrays an ideological premise, a generalized assumption that there is a scientific consensus that supports capitalist theory, which there clearly is not.

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<sup>20</sup> Robinson, William I. “Latin America in the New Global Capitalism.” *NACLA Report on the Americas* Summer 2012, p.14.

Capitalist ideology itself deliberately promotes the “deep cultural conviction” that as “economic science” it represents an impersonal process that functions outside the scope of individual will and collective control, that it is a given, that it represents a law of nature, an inevitable, unavoidable reality. Yet it turns out that capitalist practices are a function of human preference, the product of carefully calculated decision making; elitist policies that promote private aggrandizement at the expense of the common good are actually antithetical to natural law, especially insofar as they violate intuitively understood principles related to innate human rights.

The ageing, opulent, wheelchair-bound Senator in Ricardo Piglia’s postmodernist classic *Artificial Respiration* draws a compelling correlation between material wellbeing and ontological status: “for Greeks the word *ousia*, which signifies *being, essence, the thing itself* in philosophical language, also signifies wealth, money.”<sup>21</sup> Currency as a medium of exchange may constitute an abstraction, yet its significance remains all too concrete and real: money, as a measure of an individual’s personal wealth, is the primary factor that enables, as well as determines, the quality of his or her physical existence. The hopelessly impoverished mass of human residue ground down under the neo-imperial millstone of neoliberal economic policy suffers a level of degradation that transforms imagination into nightmare, as Michelle Cliff makes painfully clear in her vivid description of the Kingston shantytown where Christopher is forced to live as a small child:

the dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage.

. . . Children with swirls of white ringworm interrupting their brown skin,

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<sup>21</sup> Piglia, Ricardo. *Artificial Respiration*. Durham: Duke U P, 1994, p.53.

raised lines moving outward into circles, exploding here and there,  
spreading . . . The bones of these children, their legs and arms, bent into  
bows . . . small, all of them -- except for their rounded bellies, which  
pained them in emptiness (32-33)

while women search trash bins behind tourist hotels for leftovers, fighting off street dogs  
and each other.<sup>22</sup> What worth is there in appeals to culture, Cliff seems to be asking, on a  
once paradisiacal tropical island now poisoned with industrial pollution, “to a child with  
bone cancer . . . polio . . . TB . . . a damaged brain? . . . what good is imagination to a  
dying child?” (195-196).

Similar instinctive revulsion at gross economic injustice pervades Salmon  
Rushdie’s portrait of imperial-colonial hell in *Midnight’s Children*; this becomes  
apparent when Amina Sinai encounters the appalling human misery in pre-Independence  
Delhi’s inner-city:

as she enters these causeways where poverty eats away at the tarmac like a  
drought, where people lead their invisible lives . . . something new begins  
to assail her. Under the pressure of these streets . . . she has lost her ‘city  
eyes.’ When you have city eyes you cannot see the invisible people, the  
men with elephantiasis of the balls, and the beggars in boxcars don’t  
impinge on you, and the concrete sections of future drainpipes don’t look  
like dormitories. . . . the newness of what she was seeing made her flush. .  
. . Look, my God, those beautiful children have black teeth . . . sweeper  
women with . . . collapsed spines . . . and cripples everywhere, mutilated

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<sup>22</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *No Telephone to Heaven*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging . . . grown men with babies' legs, in crates on wheels, made out of discarded roller-skates and old mango boxes . . . It's like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads . . . no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people . . . a power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used . . . No, these are not decayed people, despite everything.<sup>23</sup>

Implicit in this passage is an intuitive respect for the inherent worth and dignity of individual human beings, as well as hope for a devastated humanity which has yet to establish its innate, fundamental rights. The image of many heads that Rushdie employs recalls the Hercules-Hydra myth adopted by English rulers as they began enclosing the Commons at the inception of the imperial age, and, according to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, encountered “the difficulty of imposing order on increasingly global systems of labor [comprised of] dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban laborers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves . . . the numerous ever-changing heads of the monster” (3-4).<sup>24</sup> Elite policies that ensured the priority of private profit over public good provided increasing impetus for harshly coercive manipulation of domestic populations and steady expropriation of territory that inevitably expanded beyond national borders to encompass ever larger portions of the

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<sup>23</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Penguin, 1981, p.92.

<sup>24</sup> Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

planet: “The dispossession and relocation of peoples have been a worldwide process spanning five hundred years” (17).

This long-term, violent project of forceful privatization of public space radically undermined worldwide norms of collective subsistence and social organization that had been in place for thousands of years:

the commons were more than a specific English agrarian practice . . . the same concept underlay the clachan, the sept, the rundel, the West African village, and the indigenous tradition of long-fallow agriculture of Native Americans -- in other words, it encompassed all those parts of the Earth that remained unprivatized, unenclosed, a noncommodity, a support for the manifold human values of mutuality. (26)

Such “values of mutuality” stem spontaneously from the instinctive feelings of sympathy and solidarity observed by Darwin, and later confirmed by Kropotkin. Violent disruptions of natural patterns of human behavior cause needless, widespread suffering and lead to severe social dysfunction. Frederic Jameson acknowledges the profoundly immoral nature of capitalist practice when he refers to “the primordial crime of capitalism . . . primal displacement of the older forms of collective life from a land now seized and privatized” (84).

Patrick Chamoiseau describes the joyful vitality and communally nourishing vibrancy of market life in post World War II Martinique, prior to the onslaught of neo-imperial globalization:

People came to the markets to do the day’s shopping, but above all to sharpen the tongue on disputes and chit-chat, to search for the friend-

relative-loved one who'd vanished around some corner of fate, to spread the news of births and deaths, to dispel the languor of loneliness, and finally, to consult about one's ailments with the sellers of medicinal herbs and wonder-working seeds. (32)<sup>25</sup>

Bureaucratic regulations and underpriced imports gradually transformed the marketplace into "hell on earth" and undermined domestic production for the benefit of foreign corporations; fast foods replaced traditional native fare, and street vendors and djobbers soon found themselves impoverished, as well as extraneous. For many among the native population, insanity and despair were the inevitable result:

we were becoming the useless foam on a changing life. . . . Those who clung to the market often succumbed to a kind of madness that became commonplace. . . . The first to waver was Bidjoule. . . . He seemed to be carrying an impossible sorrow around in his head, and darted looks of terror at our world. Tears sometimes drowned corrosive flames in his eyes. Helplessly, we saw him go under. (99)

Bidjoule, a master djobber in the market, admired by all, gradually succumbs to madness and has to be confined in an insane asylum, where he languishes and quickly dies.

Passages like these help explain why the UN Declaration guarantees the right to dignified, quality-of-life-sustaining employment, along with assurance of social protections against hunger, joblessness, and ill health. The value of human life is of preeminent concern in the UN document; money is only regarded as a means to an end,

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<sup>25</sup> Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

not an end in itself. Unemployment or underemployment can have devastating consequences on physical and mental health, as shocking statistics from imperial and colonial history amply reveal, and the increasing ravages of current neoliberal policies make all too evident. The World Health Organization began reporting alarming increases in the incidence of mental health disorders worldwide -- including drug addiction, depression, and suicide -- following the onset of neoliberalism in the 1980s, devastating trends that continue to intensify sharply as disparities in wealth grow more pronounced and extreme, particularly since the 2008 global recession.<sup>26</sup>

Medical experts demonstrate little reluctance in ascribing blame, in the face of such instinctively repelling social injustice, to a false economic ideology that valorizes selfish acquisitiveness over the common good, and that cynically ignores innate human values of sympathy and solidarity: “Neo-liberal doctrines are either unconcerned with, or positively endorse, inequalities;” these dogmas consist of empirically unsupported theories that “are antithetical to social cohesion,” espousing a fanatical agenda of privatization that results in “individual ownership of what were once possessions or functions of the state as representative of society, or of those things which were previously the possession of everyone.” Neo-liberal doctrines promote “a generalized increase in skepticism or distrust toward one’s fellows, “and promulgate the false belief

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the devastating physical and mental health consequences caused by economic deprivation see Stucker, David, MPH, PhD, and Sanjay Basu, MD, PhD. *The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills: Recessions, Budget Battles, and the Politics of Life and Death*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.



that people's "economic or 'social' problems" should be "attributed to individual failings" (20).<sup>27</sup>

Prevailing as the dominant economic and political discourse, neoliberal ideology privileges private profit and individual aggrandizement over collective wellbeing to an extreme that is historically unprecedented. While the global population multiplies, the world's wealth continues to concentrate in the hands of an increasingly tiny plutocracy, to the extent that eighty percent of the human beings currently living on the planet are now considered simply extraneous to corporate concern. As a result, they are, in effect, cast to the wayside and left there to languish and gradually die. If these throwaway people serve no useful purpose for the only human activity that holds any value in life -- making money for elites -- they obviously have only themselves to blame. Arif Dirlik points out that the managers of transnational corporate capitalism

reconstitute subjectivities across national boundaries to create producers and consumers more responsive to the operations of capital. Those who do not respond, or . . . are not essential to those operations -- four-fifths of the global population by the managers' count -- need not be colonized: they are simply marginalized. . . . And it is easier [than ever before] to say convincingly: It is their own fault. (351)

Regarded objectively and honestly, the obviously intolerable injustice of this state of human affairs cannot be rationalized or disregarded. This degree of incomparable, unprecedented human suffering elicits an instinctively understood, universally shared

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<sup>27</sup> Coburn, David and Elaine S. Coburn. "Health and Health Inequalities in a Neo-liberal Global World." *The Economics of Health Equity*. Ed. Di McIntyre and Gavin Mooney. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2007: 13-35.

ethical response among all members of the global human family. Literary expression that is informed by firm principles of moral understanding and passionate concern for social justice provides a uniquely compelling voice for articulating the necessary protest, since literature puts a recognizable human face on human agony; literature evokes empathy for the pain of flesh and blood bodies in place of the mind-numbing abstractions of impersonal statistics.

Junot Diaz connects the notion of personal failure with the experience of socio-economic dysfunction and degradation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* when Yunior refers to “unheated . . . tenements” teeming with “children whose self-hatred short-circuited their minds” (160), victimized by self-debasement that is rooted in a form of institutional racism that correlates “white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate” (264) in the contemporary capitalist caste system.<sup>28</sup> Inner-city New Jersey street corners in *Drown* feature crowds of angry adolescents whose young lives are crippled by addiction to gambling, alcohol, and drugs, the tragic outcome of chronic deprivation, random violence, and pervasive despair. Constantly on the alert for police cruisers, and simultaneously wary of vengeful losers at dice, teenagers entertain each other with mutual derision and scapegoating abuse in vain attempts at transcending their hopelessly bleak existence: “We’re all under the big streetlamps, everyone’s the color of day-old piss. When I’m fifty this is how I’ll remember my friends: tired and yellow and drunk” (“Aurora” 57)<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Diaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.

The narrator deals drugs to “older folks who haven’t had a job or a haircut since the last census. I have friends in Perth Amboy and New Brunswick who tell me they deal to whole families, from the grandparents down to the fourth-graders” (51). In the meantime, he watches helplessly as the girl he loves succumbs to crack-addled self-destruction: “I know about the nonsense that goes on in these houses, the ass that gets sold, the beasting” (62). Only a fortunate few ever succeed in breaking out of the deadly prison of the ghetto, desperately aggressive inmates like Beto in the title story, who “hated everything about the neighborhood, the break-apart buildings, the little strips of grass, the piles of garbage around the cans, and the dump, especially the dump” (91). Hapless human beings trapped in this environment freeze during frigid winters; in the torrid summertime, the heat in the buildings where they live is “like something heavy that had come inside to die” (92). The narrator in “Boyfriend” recalls nights he spent lying in bed beside his former girlfriend, Loretta, before she left him for an Italian who works on Wall Street: “We’d lay there and listen to the world outside, to the loud boys, the cars, the pigeons. Back then I didn’t have a clue what she was thinking, but now I know what to pencil into all them thought bubbles. Escape. Escape” (113). In “Miss Lora,” Yunion’s girlfriend Paloma “lived in a one-bedroom apartment with four younger siblings and a disabled mom and she was taking care of all of them. . . . Paloma was convinced that if she made *any mistakes at all*, she would be stuck in that family of hers forever” (151).<sup>30</sup> These and similar passages pervading Diaz’s texts resonate with desperate anger at the blatant injustice of oppressive socio-economic circumstances, which offer scant opportunity for achieving any decent quality of life.

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<sup>30</sup> ---. *This Is How You Lose Her*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

An intuitive understanding of the difference between basic right and wrong provides a bedrock principle for many postcolonial writers, regardless of current intellectual trends toward moral and cultural relativism. The magistrate in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* admits to a deep sense of unease when he finds himself compelled to sentence a deserter who has been unfairly conscripted:

I had no doubt, myself, then, that at each moment each one of us, man, woman, child, perhaps even the poor old horse turning the mill-wheel, knew what was just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice. . . . 'When some men suffer unjustly,' I said to myself, 'it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to feel the shame of it' (136)<sup>31</sup>

-- unless, of course, witnesses choose to conveniently rationalize the injustice, instead, or simply look the other way.

The same moral intuition prompts the magistrate to intervene on behalf of the native girl who has been blinded by torture; his compassionate decision to bring her back to her people results in his own brutal punishment at the hands of the Empire he had served for so long. When the magistrate briefly escapes his confinement and comes upon the scene where captured barbarians are about to have their feet smashed to pulp with a hammer, he protests vehemently, further compounding his personal suffering by appealing to a universal ethic that is surely recognized by everyone, although it is too often repressed and denied: " 'Not with that!' I shout. . . . You would not use a hammer on a beast, not on a beast! . . . We are the great miracle of creation! But from some

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<sup>31</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself! How --!' . . . Words fail me. 'Look at these men!' I recommence. '*Men!*' " (105) After he is violently silenced, the magistrate reflects bitterly on the futility of his impassioned appeal for mercy:

what do I stand against except the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes? . . .

Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for these barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped? (106)

The magistrate appeals to an instinctively shared sense of common decency, to an innate, intuitive sense of basic fairness, by pointing out the obvious, grave injustice that is inherent to the imperial project.

Junot Diaz articulates a similar ethical understanding throughout his writing. Referring to Oscar's vacation during the annual seasonal return, Diaz-Yunior evokes compassion for the outcasts, for the dregs of society when "Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can," advising us that "it's one big party; one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German, and Italian tourists love to rape - - yes, sir, nothing like a Santo Domingo summer" (272-273). The sardonic tone reinforces the dark humor that makes the bleakness of wretched lives somehow more bearable to contemplate. This same tone of bitter scorn reduces the otherwise terrifying figure of Trujillo to farce by means of the mocking characterizations "Fuckface" and "Failed Cattle Thief" (footnote #1, p. 2), and

disparages the tyrant's dreaded associates as fantasy-figure "witchkings" (121). Mild sarcasm colors the poignant description of Olga's pathetic reaction to Oscar's "cold-as-balls" rejection in the playground, preventing the sad scene from descending to bathos; this shabby little girl already suffers from daily humiliation at school due to her extreme poverty and poor hygiene: "and how Olga had cried! Shaking like a rag in her hand-me-downs and in the shoes that were four sizes too big! Snots pouring out her nose and everything!" (15). Despite the derisive tone, the reader cannot help feeling pity contemplating this small child's public mortification and painful shame.

An implied belief in common humanity also resonates through Yuniór's second-person appeal to the reader's empathy for the savage injustice inflicted on Abelard:

A thousand tales I could tell you about Abelard's imprisonment -- a thousand tales to wring the salt from your motherfucking *eyes* -- but I'm going to spare you the anguish, the torture, the loneliness, and the sickness of those fourteen wasted years and leave you with only the consequences (and you should wonder, rightly, if I've spared you anything). (250)

These and numerous similar passages evoke intuitive sympathy for the suffering of a fellow human being, a sense of solidarity that arises spontaneously among Abelard's equally miserable companions: "The other prisoners, out of respect, continued to call him El Doctor" (251).

Manifestations of intense affection and longing for intimate connection appear throughout the short stories. While the narrator watches bitterly as Aurora heads back into the bedlam of the crack house, he reflects on how their relationship might be quite different in less discouraging life circumstances: "I'm thinking how easy it would be for

her to turn around and say, Hey, let's go home. I'd put my arm around her and wouldn't let her go for like fifty years, maybe not ever" (61). Even though her addiction and despair apparently win out in the end, Aurora seems to share a similar dream during clear minded hours while she's locked up in prison: "I made up this whole new life in there. You should have seen it. The two of us had kids, a big blue house, hobbies, the whole fucking thing" (65).

Human beings display a natural inclination toward kindness and mutual cooperation and support. In "Negocios," the cab driver who conveys Papi to a hotel after he arrives in Miami gives him friendly advice and a guided tour through the city almost free of charge: "Whatever you save on me will help you later. I hope you do well" (168). Papi is treated with kindness by Jo-Jo, as well, who "saw in Papi another brother, a man from a luckless past needing a little direction" (190), and who offers to help him get started with his own modest business. After her ex-boyfriend Max dies in Santo Domingo, Lola gives Max Sanchez's mother the two thousand dollars she had obtained by selling her body; even though he is still only a casual acquaintance, Lola nurses Yunion after he is badly beaten on a street corner in New Brunswick: "Lola, who actually cried when she saw the state I was in . . . took care of my sorry ass. Cooked, cleaned, picked up my classwork, got me medicine, even made sure that I showered" (168). As a teacher in Don Bosco, Oscar, who had experienced the daily humiliation dished out in the "*moronic inferno*" (19) of the hallways there as a student, tries "to reach out to the school's whipping boys, offer them some words of comfort, You are not alone, you know, in this universe" (264-265).

The entire Palacio Peking staff -- Juan and Jose Then, Constantina, Marco Antonio, and Indian Benny (a thoroughly international, creole crew) -- rush to Beli's rescue when they see her being manhandled by La Fea's thugs, despite obvious risk to themselves. When one of the henchmen warns Jose, "Listen, chino, you don't know what you're doing," (142), Jose, "his wife and children dead by warlord in the thirties" (106), stonily replies, "This chino knows exactly what he's doing," as he pulls back the hammer on his pistol: "His face was a dead rictus, and in it shone everything he had lost" (142). Clives, the taxi driver, risks his life trying to intervene when the capitan's thugs begin beating Oscar in the backseat of his cab: "Clives begged the men to spare Oscar, but they laughed. You should be worrying . . . about yourself" (320); they leave Clives tied up inside while they drag Oscar to his death, but he frees himself and bravely follows them into the cane field, where he recovers Oscar's lifeless body.

Socorro and Abelard's families abjure and reject Beli after Socorro's suicide because of her "kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotblack, rekhablack" skin -- "That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's complexion as an ill omen" (248), Diaz-Yunior wryly observes -- but the infant is rescued by "a kindly darkskinned woman named Zoila [from the Greek word for life] who gave her some of her own baby's breastmilk and held her for hours a day" (252).<sup>32</sup> Readers' natural empathy is aroused once again when they learn that, sadly, the "tiniest little negrita on the planet" (253) is soon torn from Zoila's arms by Socorro's greedy relatives and sold as a

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<sup>32</sup> Diaz comments on Dominicans' overwhelming flow of compassion and support for Haitians in his essay on the 2010 earthquake, making special mention of one Dominican woman quite similar to Zoila, who "left her own infant babies at home in order to breastfeed more than twenty Haitian babies whose mothers had either been seriously injured or killed" (8).



child slave. In the footnote on the same page, Diaz/Yunior describes the plight of a seven year-old criada he knew in Santo Domingo who was forced to do all the cooking, cleaning, and fetching water for a family while simultaneously caring for two infants. “La probecita” became impregnated by a family member at fifteen, and her son was subsequently forced to work as a slave for the family as well. Since this footnote self-refers to “Mr. Community Activist” -- a role that Junot Diaz conspicuously fills in everyday life -- it is quite likely that it is not Yunior but Junot Diaz who is speaking here, and that Sobeila’s story is not fiction but fact. This instance may also suggest that Junot Diaz is the authorial voice in other footnotes, as well -- maybe even all of them; regardless, the reference obviously compounds the often impossibly complex task of distinguishing between the voice of author and narrator throughout the text.

The selling of children due to dire circumstances created by extreme poverty receives poignant mention in “The Pura Principle,” as well. Pura reveals that “for an undisclosed sum her mother had married her off at thirteen to a stingy fifty-year-old,” and that she had run away from a tia in Newark “who wanted her to take care of her retarded son and bedridden husband . . . because she hadn’t come to Nueva Yol to be a slave to anyone, not anymore” (101). Mami commiserates with her friends over “how often that happened in the campo, how Mami herself had had to fight to keep her own crazy mother from trading her for a pair of goats” (102).

Struggle for survival in an economic system that offers few decent employment opportunities for young women provides the background for the thriving prostitution business that serves as such a rich source of income for the Gangster, La Fea, and other

members of the Trujillato. The Gangster, we learn, served as a specialist in violence for the regime, while he also:

dabbled in forgery, theft, extortion, and money laundering;” yet “where our man truly excelled, where he smashed records and grabbed gold, was in the flesh trade. Then, like now, Santo Domingo was to popola what Switzerland was to chocolate. And there was something about the binding, selling, and degradation of women that brought out the best in the Gangster; he had an instinct for it, a talent. . . . under his draconian administration the so-called bang-for-the-buck ratio of Dominican sexworkers trebled. (120-121)

Neoliberal policies ensure ever increasing profits for the business of selling women and children’s bodies right into the present. These same economic circumstances play a significant role in producing the criminals who facilitate such exploitation. Like his boss Trujillo, the Gangster grows up in severely deprived living conditions, which inspire his ruthless determination to survive by whatever means necessary: “folks always underestimate what the promise of a lifetime of starvation, powerlessness, and humiliation can provoke in a young person’s character” (119).

Michele Cliff maintains that recognizing injustice involves an intuitive awakening to greater self-awareness and a deeper connection to a crucial aspect of one’s own humanity:

It is not a question of relinquishing privilege. It is a question of grasping more of myself. I have found that in the true sources are concealed my survival. My speech. My voice. To be colonized is to be rendered

insensible. To have those parts necessary to sustain life numbed. And this is in some cases -- in my case -- perceived as privilege. The test of a colonized person is to walk through a shantytown in Kingston and not bat an eye. This I cannot do. Because part of me lives there -- and as I grasp more of this part I realize what needs to be done with the rest of my life.<sup>33</sup>

Cliff's compelling phrase -- "in the true sources are concealed my survival" -- indicates that a shared sense of humanity, which is so easily, and all too frequently, obscured by the superficial differences -- such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, and ideology -- that serve to excuse the depiction of certain people as inferior, as "Other," actually constitutes the core value and essential dignity that unites all human beings. This is the same philosophical premise that underlies the ethical principles that are articulated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Trujillo may have appeared as a uniquely brazen and flamboyant tyrant on the world scene, but he represents just one among numerous Latin American dictators who have facilitated and enforced the imperial-corporate *fuku*. One can only wonder what exactly Frederic Jameson has in mind when he opines, "The dictator novel has become a genre of Latin American literature, and such works are marked above all by a profound and uneasy ambivalence, a deeper ultimate sympathy for the Dictator, which can perhaps only be explained by some enlarged social variant of the Freudian mechanism of transference" (81-82). Novels such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, and Augusto Roa Bastos' *I The Supreme* elicit utter revulsion at the extreme decadence and

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<sup>33</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *If I Could Write This in Fire*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008, p. 26.

complete moral decay of the tyrant. Gabriel Marcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* evokes mocking derision for a bestial despot; Miguel Asturias' *The President* arouses horror, along with dread for the dictator's devastated victims. In none of these well-known works, much less Junot Diaz's contemptuous caricature of Trujillo in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, does one encounter any sense of "ambivalence" or "deeper ultimate sympathy" for the monster who degrades and destroys his fellow human beings, and who rules solely through torture, terror, and violence.

Nuclear weapons represent the ultimate instrument of terror available to the dictator, the terminal stage of the deadly force that has always been employed to facilitate ruthless exploitation and guarantee elitist privilege. In the present lethal stage of transnational corporate capitalism, the United States retains the right "to resort to force to eliminate any perceived challenge to U.S. global hegemony" (3), including "the right to first use of nuclear weapons . . . even against non-nuclear powers" (218).<sup>34</sup> The deployment of nuclear and laser weapons on platforms in outer space "subjects every part of the globe to the risk of instantaneous destruction" (11).<sup>35</sup> Given such facts, it is no wonder that Oscar poses the rhetorical question: "What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo?" (6). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is replete with allusions to nuclear holocaust, beginning with Oscar's reference to Santo Domingo as "Ground Zero for the New World" on the opening page. The scar from the savage burns inflicted on Beli by the father of the family that buys her as a child-slave resembles the disfigurement of a Hiroshima survivor: "A monsterglove of festering ruination extending from the back

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<sup>34</sup> Chomsky, Noam. *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> ---. *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

of her neck to the base of her spine. A bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha” (257).

Diaz employs nuclear and science fiction imagery to depict the extreme poverty in the rural area of the Dominican Republic where Beli spent her early years, as well: “Outer Azua . . . resembled . . . irradiated terrains from . . . end-of-the-world scenarios . . . the residents could have passed for survivors of some not-so-distant holocaust. . . . these precincts were full of smoke, inbreeding, intestinal worms, twelve-year-old brides, and full-on whippings” (footnote #32, p. 256). The added observation that families in Outer Azua “were Glasgow-ghetto huge because . . . there was nothing to do after dark and because infant mortality rates were so extreme and calamities so vast you needed a serious supply of reinforcements if you expected your line to continue” (footnote #32, p. 256), conveys the inescapable impression that Third World devastation exists on a comparable level in the First World as well under the current transnational corporate regime.

Diaz envisions an “end-of-the-world” that is, ominously, “not-so-distant.” He is quite explicit about this prospect in his essay on the 2010 earthquake:

I cannot contemplate the apocalypse of Haiti without the question: where is this all leading? . . . The answer seems both obvious and chilling. I suspect that once we have finished ransacking our planet’s resources, once we have pushed a couple of thousand more species into extinction and exhausted the water table and poisoned everything in sight and exacerbated the atmospheric warming that will finish off the icecaps and drown out our coastlines, once our market operations have parsed the

world into the extremes of ultra-rich and not-quite-dead, once the famished billions that our economic systems left behind have in their insatiable hunger finished stripping the biosphere clean, what we will be left with will be a stricken, forlorn desolation, a future out of a sci-fi fever dream where the super-rich will live in walled-up plantations of impossible privilege and the rest of us will wallow in unimaginable extremity, staggering around the waste and being picked off by the hundreds of thousands by ‘natural disasters’ -- by ‘acts of god’ (6).

Diaz’s places the word natural in quotations because he regards humanity as actually being threatened by social disasters, man-made calamities that are the predictable consequences of out-of-control elitist greed.

Yet even the super-rich will find themselves hard-pressed to find safe haven in the case of nuclear Armageddon, which poses a more serious and immediate threat than ever to human survival today, given intensifying international competition. Nuclear conflagration, as Arundhati Roy has pointed out so tellingly, defies the human capacity for comprehension:

If only, if only nuclear war was just another kind of war. . . . But it isn’t. If there is nuclear war, our foes will not be . . . each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day -- only interminable night.

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind  
and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in  
our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink?  
What shall we breathe? (4)<sup>36</sup>

Diaz connects the Fall of the House of Abelard with the threat of nuclear annihilation. During their final night together before his arrest, Abelard reminds Lydia of the intrinsic value and incomparable beauty of their shared humanity when she despairs, “We’re clocks . . . Nothing more,” (236) by reassuring her gently, “We’re more than that. We’re marvels, mi amor” (326). Abelard’s expression here mirrors the magistrate’s appeal on behalf of the captive barbarians: “We are the great miracle of creation!” Yet Diaz/Yunior interjects immediately, “I wish I could stay in this moment . . . but it’s impossible. The next week two atomic eyes opened over civilian centers in Japan and . . . the world was remade. Not two days after the atomic bombs scarred Japan forever, Socorro dreamed of the faceless man” (236-237). The faceless man appears numerous times throughout the text; this image obviously refers to death, but it can also be understood to represent utter disregard for the dictates of conscience, willful blindness to the crucial difference between right and wrong.

It is clear that the *fuku* that afflicts the New World stems from the greed and violence that was introduced into the Western hemisphere with the arrival of Columbus; the contrasting epigraphs in *Oscar Wao* set the tone, and establish the framework for all that is at stake in the ensuing narrative. The chilling disclaimer from *Fantastic Four*, “Of

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<sup>36</sup> Roy, Arundhati. “The End of Imagination.”  
Desarrollobiocultural.wikispaces.com/file/view/The+end+of+imagination+(Roy).pdf.  
Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* provides a vivid, terrifying vision of life for survivors in a post-nuclear holocaust world.

what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?” corresponds with contemporary neoliberal dogma that designates the tragic consequences of unscrupulous avarice as mere “externalities,” for which business leaders and political elites assume no moral responsibility. Since the individual members of any given corporate entity are entirely replaceable, the corporation can be regarded as an indifferent monster, a superhuman being, like Galactus. According to prevailing economic theology, a corporation’s sole mandate is to maximize profits for shareholders by means of relentless growth and ever-widening expansion; human suffering is completely irrelevant to the pursuit of limitless riches.

Juxtaposed against this heartless corporate machine stands globalized humanity, the extended human family, “creolized,” in effect, through the intermixing of peoples and cultures, calling out for recognition of its innate rights through the poetic appeal of Derek Walcott’s *Shabine*: “Christ have mercy on all living things! / . . . out of corruption my soul takes wings . . . / I . . . saw / when these slums of empire was a paradise / I had a sound colonial education / . . . and either I’m a nobody, or I’m a nation.” The word “nation” can be interpreted here, not in terms of its usual association with a limited, particularized political-cultural community comprising an individual nation-state, but rather according to the sense of its Latin root -- that which has been born -- which would infer instead the emergence of collective consciousness, awareness of humanity’s collective existence as members of a single biological family, whose common home is planet Earth, asserting the priority of communal wellbeing over private aggrandizement and individual greed.



As Aijaz Ahmad suggests, writing back to empire necessarily entails interrogating the capitalist economic model; it seems evident, when one looks back over the past half-millennium of predatory expropriation and exploitation practiced so relentlessly by a self-privileged minority, that the principal source of injustice in human societies has been the prevailing discourse that rationalizes and justifies unconstrained avarice. In his essay on the earthquake in Haiti, Diaz describes the current global economic system as a

rapacious stage of capitalism. A cannibal stage where, in order to power the explosion of the super-rich and the ultra-rich, the middle classes are being forced to fail, working classes are being re-proletarianized, and the poorest are being pushed beyond the grim limits of subsistence, into a kind of sepulchral half-life (6).

Capitalist ideology and practice has always been rapacious as well as cannibalistic, by its very nature; it has simply reached an especially destructive stage in its neoliberal form -- a stage that is likely to prove terminal. The contemporary neoliberal paradigm persists in placing corporate profits above people, remaining indifferent to looming environmental catastrophe, insisting on relentless expansionism that keeps pushing humanity to the brink of self-annihilation. Unless alternative forms of viable economic organization can be realized, paradigms that ensure social justice, support functioning democracy, and guarantee human rights, unprecedented disaster threatens. The current, all too real threat to the very survival of the human species makes the horrors of the European holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s seem like a mere rehearsal for ultimate calamity. In Diaz's terms, such alternative economic models would create the

healing *zafa* necessary to dispel the deadly *fuku* of transnational corporate capitalism that currently threatens imminent collective doom.

## Junot Diaz's Fiction in Historical, Socio-Economic Context

Setting aside claims by poststructuralists that epistemological uncertainty and moral ambiguity are the inevitable result of the socially constructed nature of language, and assuming instead that human language is a universally shared, genetically derived human capacity, governed by the rules of a common generative grammar that makes meaning communicable -- however imperfectly -- it becomes clear that the conceptual indeterminacies addressed by poststructuralist critics often arise from contrasting intellectual assumptions, rather than from the nature of language itself. Put another way, such ambiguities frequently stem not from language capacity, but from language use. Despite the poststructuralist prohibition against "grand" narratives, as we shall see, Junot Diaz invites us to assume an eagle's eye view of human affairs in the Western hemisphere over the past half-millennium, a perspective grounded firmly in an ethical universal, based on innate human rights, in order to more fully understand and appreciate contemporary living conditions in his island home, as well as the predicament of fellow Dominicans who seek relief from degrading poverty by immigrating to the United States.

The opening lines of *Oscar Wao* reveal the urgent need to examine the broad outlines of the crucial historical background in the Caribbean: "They say it came first from Africa in the screams of the enslaved, that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began."<sup>37</sup> The arrival of Columbus unleashed monstrous evil that introduced "the Curse and Doom of the New World." The question Diaz invites us to explore is whether this curse, or "*fuku*," signifies an indeterminate space between moral binaries, an ambiguous grey area intervening between

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<sup>37</sup> Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007, p.1.

(and thus interrogating) subjectively constructed polarities of Good versus Evil, or whether the fuku actually represents instead a uniquely pernicious, ontologically grounded form of malevolence that invaded the Western hemisphere with the arrival of the Europeans, and that still persists in the form of neoliberal imperialism to this day. The unending struggle between good and evil is certainly the central focus of the many comic books and animes, as well as works of science fiction and fantasy, to which Diaz alludes throughout the text of *Oscar Wao*, which seems only fitting, given his subject -- the genocidal practices of the conquistadors, the horrors of the slave trade, the cruelties of Trujillo, and the resonance of each of these with the curse pronounced by Melkor: “The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly to my will. But upon all whom you love my thoughts shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into the darkness of despair. . . . They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death” (*Oscar Wao* , 5, footnote 3). Yet despite the supernatural, sci-fi overtones, a strong suggestion resonates throughout Diaz’s text that there is nothing mysterious about the fuku that afflicts the New World, for its terrible consequences derive not from some vague, indeterminable malignity, but rather from easily recognizable human actions motivated by ruthless greed.<sup>38</sup>

The fuku represents the pervasive greed and violence that was introduced by Europeans into a comparatively innocent New World, an idea that is strongly supported

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<sup>38</sup> The same imperial violence that brought devastation to the Caribbean likewise laid waste to the once thriving political economy of early nineteenth century India; Nehru, writing from a British jail in the mid 1940s, commented sarcastically, “The solicitude which British industrialists and economists have shown for the Indian peasant has been truly gratifying. In this view . . . one can only conclude that some powerful and malign fate, some supernatural agency, has countered their intentions and measures and made that peasant one of the poorest and most miserable beings on earth.” *Discovery*, 293, 326, 301. Quoted in Chomsky, *Year 501*, 20.

by historical and anthropological research -- especially recent work that has been ongoing since the 1960s, when Western intellectuals began seriously questioning traditionally accepted ideological conventions about the “civilizing mission” that was initiated by the Admiral’s “discovery.” Two important scholarly works, in particular, published near the bi-millennial anniversary of Columbus’s landing on Hispaniola, develop this ethical understanding of events quite convincingly: David Stannard’s epic *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, a detailed examination of the massive genocide that occurred after Columbus’s arrival, and Noam Chomsky’s classic study, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, which traces the imperial project of the conquistadors through the end of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

According to Chomsky, the arrival of Europeans in the Western hemisphere precipitated an unprecedented human disaster: “The conquest of the New World set off two vast demographic catastrophes, unparalleled in history: the virtual destruction of the indigenous population of the Western hemisphere, and the devastation of Africa as the slave trade rapidly expanded to serve the needs of the conquerors, and the continent itself was subjugated.”<sup>40</sup> Chomsky insists that this tragic outcome was hardly inevitable, noting Adam Smith’s somber observation, during the early days of English colonization of North America, to this effect: “ ‘The savage injustice of the Europeans rendered an event, which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive’ ” (4). The gradual globalization of the economy and intermixing of the world’s peoples and cultures, if it

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<sup>39</sup> It turns out it is no longer Spain, or other European nations wreaking the major global havoc these days, but rather the self-styled beacon of democracy here in the United States. Examining the historical record closely, it becomes obvious that the U.S. elites were impatient to grab their share of the world’s spoils -- namely, the lion’s -- from the earliest decades of the young republic.

<sup>40</sup> Chomsky, Noam. *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*. Boston: South End Press, 1993, p.5.

had been guided and governed by a universal ethic, could have produced reciprocal benefits that would have enhanced the well-being of all who shared in the process; sadly, for vast majorities, the opposite has turned out to be the case.

David Stannard asserts, unequivocally, “The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world,” one that resulted in the extermination of as many as 100 million people.<sup>41</sup> This genocide is what Diaz refers to by invoking “the death bane of the Tainos.” Much is made of the Nazi Holocaust of the 1930’s and 1940’s, understandably, yet the scale of savagery in the Western hemisphere after the arrival of Columbus, Stannard argues, deserves at least comparable attention, not to mention honest recognition. In a recent conversation with Andre Vltchek, Chomsky points out:

Unfortunately there is fierce competition over which is the greatest crime the West has committed. When Columbus landed in the Western hemisphere, there were probably 80-100 million people with advanced civilizations: commerce, cities, etc. Not long afterward about 95 percent of this population had disappeared. In what is now the territory of the United States, there were maybe ten million or so Native Americans, but by 1900, according to the census, there were 200,000 in the country. But all of this is denied. In the leading intellectual, left-liberal journals in the Anglo-American world, it’s simply denied . . . casually and with no comment.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stannard, David. *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1992, p. x.

<sup>42</sup> Chomsky, Noam and Andre Vltchek. *On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare*. New York: Pluto, 2013, p.2.

Diaz insists that we acknowledge this deadly background at the outset of his narrative, for it provides the foundation for all that follows.

Stannard maintains that a vast and highly sophisticated network of highly civilized native societies had thrived in the Western hemisphere for over 10,000 years prior to the encroachment of Europeans; moreover, these Native American cultures were arguably superior to those of Europe in terms of their social organization, infrastructure development, and comparable egalitarian harmony. The single area where the natives lagged behind their white European counterparts was in military technology, as well as an ideologically-driven capacity for ruthlessness.<sup>43</sup> Chomsky emphasizes that:

European success was a tribute to its mastery of the means and immersion in the culture of violence. . . . In the American colonies, the natives were astonished by the savagery of the Spanish and British . . . European domination of the world ‘relied critically upon the constant use of force,’ [distinguished military historian Geoffrey] Parker writes: ‘It was thanks to their military superiority, rather than to any social, moral or natural advantage, that the white peoples of the world managed to create and control . . . the first global hegemony in History’. (7-8)

There can be no doubt that epidemics played a huge role in the radical decline among native populations, yet Stannard maintains this cannot excuse nor should it obfuscate the fact that “the near total destruction of the Western Hemisphere’s native people was

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<sup>43</sup> Stannard, David. *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1992, p. x. Stannard’s claims about advanced civilizations in the Americas are largely supported by Charles C. Mann’s important study *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage, 2006), which draws together impressive evidence from anthropological, geographical, and archeological sources, as well as cultural studies.

neither inadvertent nor inevitable. . . . disease and genocide were dynamic forces . . . each one feeding upon the other . . . driving countless numbers of ancient societies to the brink -- and often over the brink -- of total extermination” (xii).<sup>44</sup>

Chomsky quotes from Bartholome de las Casas’ contemporary account of how the conquistadors responded to the warm welcome they received from the indigenous peoples of Hispaniola (who “ ‘of all the infinite universe of humanity’ ” struck the outraged priest as “ ‘the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity’ ”):

the Spanish fell upon them ‘like ravening wild beasts . . . killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying’ . . . with ‘the strangest and most varied methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before. . . . It was a general rule among the Spanish to be cruel . . . not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings.’ (198)

These atrocities -- which in contemporary parlance would be considered shocking crimes against humanity, included chopping off limbs, feeding infants to war dogs, systematic rape, as well as group immolations -- religiously inspired rituals such as “Christ and the Apostles,” whereby thirteen natives, men and women, were hung suspended over fire with their feet just touching the ground to prevent asphyxiation while the victims were slowly roasted alive. This type of barbaric violence is a central component of the fuku.

Jacqueline Loss notes that:

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<sup>44</sup> Charles C. Mann provides detailed examination of the role played by epidemics in precipitating demographic catastrophe; like Stannard, he argues there can be doubt that European violence played a significant role in drastic population decline among native peoples.



it is difficult to bypass the possibility that Yuniors surname alludes to the apostle of the Indies, Bartolome de Las Casas . . . [who] spoke out against [the Tainos] slavery under the *encomienda*<sup>45</sup> system, at first saying Africans should be used instead but finally coming to oppose all types of enslavement -- though by then it was too late for the Africans. (809)<sup>46</sup>

Loss does not comment any further regarding the vicious treatment of either Tainos or Africans, though for Diaz these are crucial issues -- central to the historical record that has been suppressed and denied. Nor does Loss mention that Las Casas traveled to Spain to plead with King Charles V to stop the ongoing slaughter, nor that the Crown received him by setting up a public debate with Jesuit theologian Juan de Sepulveda, who dismissed Las Casas' appeals for social justice, and, relying instead on Aristotle as well as Christian doctrine, argued that native peoples were subhumans whom "the wise may hunt down . . . in the same way they would wild animals."<sup>47</sup> Diaz's references to native figures such as Hatuey and Anacaona in his footnotes suggest that he is well aware of this genocidal historical background.

Robert Crassweller, similarly, in his otherwise valuable history, gives short shrift to events following immediately upon the heels of Columbus's landing, summing it all up in a single sentence at the start of Chapter Three: "The history of Hispaniola . . . is a tale of struggle, sorrow, and disaster so prolonged that it has no parallel in history," echoing

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<sup>45</sup> A system by which Spanish conquerors were "given" natives to instruct in the Catholic faith, in return for which the natives would show gratitude by agreeing to work as literal slaves for their benevolent owners, primarily to deliver gold; penalties for noncompliance included torture, mutilation, and lingering, excruciating death.

<sup>46</sup> Loss, Jacqueline. "Junot Diaz (1968-)" *Latino and Latina Writers, Volume 2*. Alan West-Durán, ed. New York: Charles Scribner's, 2004, 803-816.

<sup>47</sup> Stannard, 211.

Stannard, yet providing no further information or comment.<sup>48</sup> Prominent literary critics, heavily influenced by prevailing poststructuralist presumptions about the “subjectively constructed” nature of all historical narratives, not only ignore the details of events on the ground after the Admiral’s arrival, but vehemently challenge even the possibility of attaining any verifiable account of what occurred. Monica Hannah, for example, insists that, “Yunior often explicitly rejects the possibility of recovering an original, whole story” (498).<sup>49</sup> Yet Hannah herself presumes to comprehend at least one part of the “whole” story when she claims, incorrectly, that there was a “massive diaspora following Trujillo’s ascension” in her opening paragraph. Piero Gleijeses, Frank Moyan Pons, and other historians point out, as does Diaz himself in his footnotes (*Oscar Wao*, 90), that the Dominican diaspora actually began *after* Trujillo’s assassination, with the ascension of Balaguer. Accurate evaluation of Balaguer’s role in shaping Dominican society is essential for understanding the persisting influence of the fuku, as Diaz’s novel makes quite clear.

Hannah maintains that the juxtaposed epigraphs, from Derek Walcott and *The Fantastic Four*, confront the reader with “a high stakes battle at play in the narration . . . over how to represent Dominican history” (499); according to Hannah, the

coexistence of multiple narrative frames allows Yunior to arrive at a history that he sees as more truthful than the accounts that purport authoritative control over the past because of the latter’s omissions . . . he simultaneously includes the reader in this process of reconstruction . . . by

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<sup>48</sup> Crassweller, Robert D. *The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator*. New York: Macmillan, 1966, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Hannah, Monica. “Reassembling the Fragments,” *Callaloo*, 33.2 (2010): 498-520.

emphasizing the constructed nature of all histories and narratives in general. (501)

But Hannah herself, ironically, seems to be claiming to possess the “whole story” here, once again, for she concludes authoritatively that, “Yunior never gives one single definite answer. . . rejecting history that claims a definitive interpretation” (505). This is tantamount to saying that since all histories are constructed, then all are necessarily suspect, and must be greeted with skepticism, and can therefore be disputed, or else just conveniently ignored.

Although much of the historical record remains inaccessible, and arriving at a definitive account of all that transpired in the Caribbean is therefore impossible, the basic facts surrounding the European intervention into the Western hemisphere remain indisputable, and are essential for understanding what happened in the past, as well as where matters stand today. There can be ongoing debate about the exact size of the native population in 1492, as well as the precise role played by pestilence in the radical, abrupt decline in demographics throughout Latin America during the first one hundred years after Columbus landed on Hispaniola. Yet Europeans’ responsibility for practicing systematic genocide, and for deliberately spreading disease as a means of eradicating natives who were inconveniently occupying lands coveted by whites, demands full accountability as well as honest scrutiny. There can be no doubt, from recent scholarship and from contemporary records -- not only from Las Casas, but from the boasts of conquistadors themselves, who bragged about their barbaric exploits, as Stannard documents -- that genocidal crimes against humanity systematically occurred throughout the Caribbean and the rest of Latin America after the arrival of the Europeans. These

crimes, it is important to emphasize, are a crucial component of what Diaz means when he refers to the fuku.

No one person, and certainly not Junot Diaz, claims to possess “the whole story”: human knowledge is inherently limited, and only advances tentatively, incrementally, even in the realm of the hard sciences. Neither Diaz, as a fiction writer, nor scholars such as Stannard, Mann, or Chomsky, pretend to possess any type of “totalizing” truth; nevertheless, they insist, correctly, that there are certain aspects of this history that people can agree on with a reasonable degree of confidence, and that the facts revealed are far from pretty, to say the least. Overreliance on vague theories that insist on the subjective construction of all histories leads to frequent misinterpretations that, unfortunately, are all too common throughout poststructuralist discourse; just because human beings cannot grasp the complete truth, does not mean that they necessarily fail to grasp any truth at all.

A legendary lecture delivered by Bertrand Russell in 1923 elucidates the basic problem with poststructuralist assertions regarding epistemological indeterminacy, which arise from a fundamental confusion over the relationship between language and knowledge. According to Russell,

In dealing with highly abstract matters [such as European intervention in the Western hemisphere] it is much easier to grasp the symbols (usually words) than it is to grasp what they stand for. The result of this is that all thinking that purports to be philosophical or logical consists in attributing to the world the properties of language. . . . But language has many

properties which are not shared by things in general, and when these properties intrude into our metaphysic it becomes altogether misleading.<sup>50</sup>

Russell laments what he calls:

the fallacy of verbalism -- the fallacy that consists in mistaking the properties of words for the properties of things. Vagueness and precision alike are characteristics which can only belong to a representation, of which language is an example. They have to do with the relation between a representation and that which it represents. Apart from representation, whether cognitive or mechanical, there can be no such thing as vagueness or precision; things are what they are, and there is an end of it.<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, the facts of the historical record remain what they are, regardless of human beings' ability to access, comprehend, or articulate them adequately.

For Hannah, the historical background must also be regarded as indeterminate because "magical realism" permeates *Oscar Wao*; Hannah ironically proposes a totalizing definition for a term that has been employed variously by different fiction writers, and thus can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. According to Hannah, magical realism "is presented as a Caribbean mode of understanding and representing history" (509). The history Diaz alludes to "is cyclical," so that we become caught up in a "dialectic between skepticism and belief" (500-501). Hannah insists that the novel's opening line, " 'They say it came first from Africa' . . . signals the injection of doubt from the beginning of the first sentence;" we can therefore only conclude that "the origins

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<sup>50</sup> Read before the Jowett Society, Oxford, November 25, 1922. First published in *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, 1 (1923), 84-92.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

of fuku are mysterious” (502). Thus the text of *Oscar Wao*, according to Hannah, undermines -- deconstructs -- itself by introducing skepticism about its content from the very start. Thus the concept of the fuku supposedly conveys mere ambiguity, instead of clearly denoting the persistent malevolence of violent greed that Diaz obviously has in mind.

T.S. Miller, in her otherwise lucid and valuable essay on genre allusions in *Oscar Wao*, refers to what she calls “the increasingly nebulous category designated ‘magic realism,’ ” (93) -- suggesting a possible challenge to Hannah’s sweeping claims about a uniform Caribbean discourse -- but then proceeds to insist that *Oscar Wao* deconstructs itself through Diaz’s copious use of footnotes. (Hannah refers to these footnotes, as well, but she does not argue that they necessarily deconstruct the main body of the text.) For Miller, the footnotes “function to turn the novel into a sort of self-annotated, self-undermining text,” leaving us with an unreliable historical narrative; furthermore, “The footnotes . . . serve purposes beyond their undercutting of the principal narration, most obviously providing an outlet for Yunior’s historiographical impulse: his secret history becomes marginal in multiple ways, a history told from the margins and *in* the margins” (96) [Miller’s emphasis].<sup>52</sup>

Yet as C.L.R. James’s research makes all too painfully clear, there is nothing secret, or marginal, about the horrors of the slave trade, or the human misery suggested by the screams of the enslaved.<sup>53</sup> Miller does not explain or provide examples of how the footnotes function to “undercut the principal narration” in the way she describes; yet her

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<sup>52</sup> Miller, T.S. “Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 38.1 (2011): 92-114.

<sup>53</sup> James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Vintage, 1989.

insistence on the text's indeterminacy and ambiguity here should not be surprising, since she is convinced that all historical (that is, "grand") narratives should be regarded as subjectively and/or culturally constructed, and therefore as necessarily suspect. The important point here is not to quibble with poststructuralist assumptions, but rather to question the way such notions tend to subvert possibilities for coherent interpretation of Diaz's text.

Ignacio Lopez-Calvo, yet another critic who seems intent on deconstructing Diaz's novel, insists that the footnotes somehow show that Diaz is exoticizing his narrative in order to provide entertaining titillation for his First World audience: "in reality, is he [Diaz] not acting as a native informant? Is he not unwittingly giving us that 'voyeuristic thrill' that he tries to avoid?" (78).<sup>54</sup> Lopez-Calvo quotes from Diaz's interview with Meghan O'Rourke in 2007 to support this spurious claim, where Diaz explains:

'The footnotes are there for a number of reasons; primarily, 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 the single voice -- this felt like a smart move to me.' (78)

This strategy of employing footnotes, of including lower and higher "frequency" texts, certainly represents a postmodernist approach; J.M. Coetzee employs a similar technique

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<sup>54</sup> Lopez-Calvo, Ignacio. "A Postmodern Platano's Trujillo: Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, more Macondo than McOndo," *Antipodas* 20 (2009): 75-90.

in *Diary of a Bad Year*, published around the same time that Diaz made these comments to O'Rourke.

Yet one must ask whether “challenge” and “contest” necessarily equates with “undermine” or “deconstruct.” Literary history has featured jesters poking fun at kings ever since Shakespeare, if not earlier; Tiresias (admittedly, no jester, yet surely “challenging the pronouncements of the king”) confronts Oedipus, just as Cassandra fails in her seemingly mad attempts to forewarn the citizens of Troy, and, later on, her captor Atreus. In these and similar instances, such challenges actually amplify and support the central themes of the narrative. Close examination of the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* reveals the same effect; the footnotes, almost without exception, clearly support and lend added authority to, rather than undermine or call into question, the historical and topical references in the fictional text.

Nevertheless, Lopez-Calvo concludes that the footnotes necessarily demonstrate that Diaz is offering “cultural translations of a native informant”; Lopez-Calvo adds a further qualification, as well: “of course, [the fact] that the novel was written in English also suggests that he did not have the ‘plataneros’ on the island in mind” (79). That this is actually the case seems less than obvious, considering Lopez-Calvo’s observation in the following paragraph that the Dominican government has named Diaz “cultural ambassador of the Dominican Republic in the world;” apparently, at least *some* readers in the Dominican Republic identify with the novel, either in English, or in the Spanish translation that Diaz has made sure is available to the island’s supposedly irrelevant inhabitants.



Lopez-Calvo makes the further problematic claim that Oscar is still profoundly affected by “the long-gone Trujillato” (75), suggesting that the repressive mechanisms of Trujillo’s regime no longer remain in place by the time Oscar visits the island. Yet the historical record shows that Balaguer ruled the Dominican Republic with extreme brutality long after the dictator’s demise, all the while dutifully implementing the socially disastrous economic policies demanded by Washington. When Oscar arrives in Santo Domingo during the summer that he encounters Ybon Pimental, he finds the consequences of neoliberal “reforms” glaringly evident. Diaz renders Oscar’s painful impressions of conditions in the city in a two and a half-page anaphoric chorus punctuated by the poignant refrain “mind-boggling poverty”:

after he’d given out all his taxi money to beggars . . . after he’d watched shoeless seven year-olds fighting for the scraps he’d left on his plate at an outdoor café . . . after a skeletal vieja grabbed both his hands and begged him for a penny, after his sister said, You think that’s bad, you should see the bateys [squalid hovels of sugar plantation workers] . . . [Oscar] settled down in . . . the house that Diaspora built. (276-279)

It is glaringly obvious that living conditions for average Dominicans have significantly worsened since the days of the infamous dictator; El Jefe may be “long gone,” but the pervasive fuku that afflicts the island clearly lingers on.

In yet another sign of the text deconstructing itself, according to Lopez-Calvo,

Diaz's novel involuntarily<sup>55</sup> perpetuates Trujillo's myth . . . [because] the tyrant's personality and exploits cannot be re-created easily without resorting to a vocabulary and a tone that are somehow reminiscent of Magical Realism, hence seemingly abetting his [Trujillo's] mythification and encouraging the belief he had supernatural powers. (85-86)

Lopez reinforces this dubious claim by quoting Diaz, asserting flatly that, "Diaz agrees with this position: 'Because without curses and alien mongooses and Sauron and Darkseid, the Trujillato cannot be accessed, eludes our 'modern' minds. We need these fictional lenses, otherwise It we cannot see (O'Rourke interview n.p.)'" (86). Yet Diaz's comment here does not at all support Lopez-Calvo's contention. Fantasy and science-fiction in *Oscar Wao* do not necessarily mythologize the dictator; rather, employing these forms represents a valuable strategy primarily because the horrors that Diaz strives to describe, past as well as present, stagger the human imagination and surpass the power of ordinary discourse.

Junot Diaz struggles to find linguistic strategies that might be adequate for expressing the enormity of the human tragedy that occurred in the Caribbean, and that continues unfolding and amplifying throughout the Western hemisphere to this day. His use of genre in no way supports "mythification" of Trujillo, as Lopez-Calvo claims; rather, it represents a metaphorical strategy for attempting to convey otherwise inexpressible horrors, evil consequences deriving not from the pathological actions of a single individual, or some mysterious, supernatural curse, but from savage, systemic elitist policies motivated by ruthless greed. Eduardo Galeano emphasizes the venality that

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<sup>55</sup> It is important for poststructuralists to emphasize, in accord with Roland Bathes' insistence on the "death of the author" that writers do not necessarily control the material "writing itself" in their texts.

lies at the heart of Latin American history; in the fifteenth century, Spain, and European nations generally, he maintains, were desperate for precious metals to pay for their continual warfare, which had drained national treasuries. In 1492, Spain had just finished defeating and expelling the last of the Moors, after eight hundred years of holy war; the Vatican had designated Queen Isabella patroness of the Holy Inquisition. For Galeano, the

feat of discovering America can only be understood in the context of the tradition of crusading wars . . . the Church needed no prompting to provide a halo for the conquest of unknown lands across the ocean. Pope Alexander VI, who was Spanish, ordained Queen Isabella as proprietor and master of the New World.<sup>56</sup>

According to Galeano, “The epic of the Spanish and Portuguese in America combined propagation of the Christian faith with usurpation and plunder of native wealth. . . . The myth of El Dorado, the golden king, was born . . . Caribbean island populations were totally exterminated in the gold mines . . . natives killed their children and committed mass suicide” (14-15). The staggering enormity of this catastrophe defies comprehension, not to mention articulation. This is Junot Diaz’s crucial point in his comment about genre; examined closely, it becomes obvious that Diaz’s project involves de-mythification of Trujillo, not the opposite.

Lopez-Calvo’s convictions regarding linguistic indeterminacy ultimately lead to a conclusion that is painfully reductive: “In the final analysis, for all the irreverence of his prose, Junot Diaz’s approach is not as radical as he intended it to be” (87). He assumes

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<sup>56</sup> Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 15.

that Diaz's text necessarily undermines itself, as all texts inevitably must, because language is socially constructed; since words are infinitely iterable, they therefore automatically deconstruct their apparent meanings. Yet such poststructuralist assumptions confuse language capacity with language use, and conveniently sidestep the semantic role of ideology, which too often determines one's interpretation of facts, not to mention whether one even acknowledges the existence of facts at all. If language creates facts, as poststructuralists seem to assert, then it becomes possible to rearrange reality simply by changing the words one uses to describe it; that is, things become what they are simply because someone says so. This certainly seems to be the case with Lopez-Calvo's claims about Diaz using science fiction and fantasy to support "mythification" of Trujillo, as well as his insistence that the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* reveal that Diaz perceives his role as a writer as that of a "native informant" who is merely entertaining a First World audience.

A similar intellectual deferral occurs in the case of Jacqueline Loss, who casually refers to "leftist Juan Bosch" (807), a characterization that is both totalizing, as well as ideological. It is hardly obvious that Bosch was any kind of "leftist" when one carefully examines the relevant historical scholarship. Piero Gleijeses's highly regarded study of political succession in the Dominican Republic after Trujillo's assassination reveals that Bosch, in fact, advocated only modest political and economic reforms; thus, according to Gleijeses, Bosch should actually be regarded as a moderate, left-centrist ("left" indicating that he expressed a certain measure of concern for the welfare of the Dominican population, something his political rivals, drawn from business elites and former high-ranking members of the Trujillato -- including, prominently, his chief rival, Balaguer --

preferred to completely ignore).<sup>57</sup> In the same sentence, Jacqueline Loss refers to Balaguer's "authoritarian rule from 1966 to 1978," a striking understatement that sidesteps crucial facts when one considers the extreme state violence and severe political repression of the period, thoroughly documented in Frank Moya Pons's detailed account of political succession up to and including the Dominican election of 2004.<sup>58</sup> The terror campaign waged by Balaguer, during what Diaz reveals in a footnote on page 90 came to be notoriously "known locally as the Twelve Years," easily rivaled the worst crimes of the Trujillo dictatorship. Loss also fails to mention that Balaguer ruled the country, exercising similar brutality, from 1986 until 1996, as well, and that, like his predecessor, he enjoyed implicit U.S. support throughout. In effect, Balaguer stepped into Trujillo's shoes as facilitator for the fuku.

Loss's choice of the term "authoritarian" is clearly inadequate for conveying an accurate sense of what transpired in the Dominican Republic after Trujillo, or for explaining why Diaz chooses the word "Demon" (90) to describe the dictator's successor. According to co-authors Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, under Balaguer,

para-military 'death squads' quickly made their appearance and went on a rampage against political dissenters, petty criminals, and sometimes purely arbitrary victims. . . . In July, 1971, Norman Gall alleged that in the post-1965 era, the number of political murders in the Dominican Republic

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<sup>57</sup> Gleijeses, Piero. *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt and American Intervention*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1978.

<sup>58</sup> Pons, Frank Moya. *The Dominican Republic: A National History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2010.

exceeded that of any comparable period under the monstrous Trujillo.  
(243-244)<sup>59</sup>

Gall points out that these death squads “are organized by the armed forces and police, which in both cases over the years have been given heavy U.S. material and advisory support” (244) -- as is typical of U.S. practice in the region generally.

Latin American specialist Greg Grandin comments, regarding the U.S. sponsored and facilitated military coup against Chile’s democratically elected Salvador Allende in 1973:

During the two decades before his election, military coups had overthrown governments in 12 countries: Cuba in 1952; Guatemala and Paraguay in 1954; Argentina and Peru in 1962; Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Honduras and again Guatemala in 1963; Brazil and Bolivia in 1964; and Argentina once more in 1966. Many of these coups were encouraged and sanctioned by Washington and involved subverting exactly the kind of civil-society pluralism -- of the press, political parties and unions -- that Allende promoted. (7-8)<sup>60</sup>

Grandin emphasizes that, although an avowed Marxist, Allende was firmly committed to social democracy, for he was convinced that social justice, democracy, and regulated

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<sup>59</sup> Chomsky, Noam and Edward Herman. *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume I*. Boston: South End Press, 1979. The reference to Norman Gall comes from Norman Gall, “Santo Domingo: The Politics of Terror,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 July 1971.

<sup>60</sup> *London Review of Books*, Volume 34, Number 14, 19 July 2012, pp. 6-8. To this list we can add the unsuccessful coup against Chavez in 2002, the second coup (following his violent displacement in 1991) of Haiti’s Aristede in 2004, a failed attempt in Ecuador in 2010, a successful coup in Honduras in 2009, as well as in Paraguay in June of 2012. Various commentators have expressed the conviction that Bolivia is next on the U.S. hit list.

markets could co-exist harmoniously and productively. Yet the threat of independent, successful development in any Latin American country -- especially development based on the principle that each country's natural resources should first and foremost benefit that country's population, instead of U.S. corporate and financial interests -- poses a perceived threat to U.S. business profits and hegemonic (that is, imperial) goals. This was clearly demonstrated in the case of Castro's Cuba, as well as Guatemala's Arbenz -- both of which represented socio-economic models focused on social justice and human development that might be imitated by others in the region, including "leftist" Bosch in 1963.<sup>61</sup>

The example of Allende is crucial for understanding the U.S. accusations of "dictator" consistently levied against Fidel Castro. Grandin argues that the example of Allende, who insisted that social democracy could be achieved through "the ballot, the legislature, the courts and the media," contextualizes "the choice that had been forced upon Castro: suspend democracy or perish" (8). Nevertheless, for Lopez-Calvo, Trujillo and Castro must be regarded as equivalent; referring to *The Feast of the Goat*, Lopez-Calvo states unequivocally (not shying from a totalizing claim where it serves his ideological preference):

Mario Vargas Llosa conceives Rafael Trujillo's psychology and unscrupulous political tactics as a synecdoche for most Latin American dictators and their regimes. . . . [in the novel] he actually described all

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<sup>61</sup> James Cockcroft, noted expert on Mexican political history, notes in an interview on *The Real News*, 17 July, 2012, that current protests over charges of widespread electoral fraud in Mexico's recent presidential elections (similar to those surrounding the 2006 election, when Lopez Obrador was also a leading candidate with broad popular support -- like Bosch and Allende) reflect a similar problem: Obrador, as a "left-centrist" -- like Bosch and Allende -- is simply not acceptable to the U.S.

Latin American dictators, including Fidel Castro, whose charisma is . . . comparable to that of Trujillo. . . . Vargas Llosa points out that Trujillo's apparatus of political control was similar to the one used by Castro today.<sup>62</sup>

Lopez-Calvo's sweeping claim here conveniently ignores relevant geopolitical context: namely, that Trujillo received consistent U.S. support, first as an anti-fascist (up until 1946), and then as an anti-communist after World War II, throughout his worst, well-documented abuses. In contrast, the U.S. has engaged in all-out terrorist warfare for more than half a century against Castro, beginning under Eisenhower, and sharply escalating under John Kennedy. Furthermore, Kennedy changed the mandate of U.S.-supported Latin American military institutions from hemispheric defense to "internal" defense -- which means repression of labor unions, as well as religious or civil organizations advocating for social and economic justice, a fact thoroughly documented by Chomsky along with numerous other scholars, including Lars Schoultz, who in the early 1980s demonstrated unequivocally the close correlation between U.S. support and human rights violations throughout the region.<sup>63</sup>

Lopez-Calvo insists that Trujillo's reign resulted in many positive outcomes for the Dominican Republic, such as his "unifying discourse of nationalism . . . later emulated by Joaquin Balaguer" (14), which he regards as a welcome relief from the hopeless factionalism and political chaos of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century caudillo system. Yet this perspective neglects the brutal atrocities by which that

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<sup>62</sup> Lopez-Calvo, Ignacio. *God and Trujillo: Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator*. Gainesville: Florida U P, 2005, p.43.

<sup>63</sup> Schoultz, Lars. *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1981.



“discourse” was implemented. Lopez-Calvo likewise ignores the even worse human rights abuses that continued for twenty-two years under Balaguer, whom Lopez-Calvo characterizes as merely guilty of certain vague, unnamed “inefficiencies” (2).

Nor does Lopez-Calvo appear troubled by evidence offered by scholars like Grandin, when -- once again, in a sweeping, totalizing claim -- he confidently asserts that all the data in the historical record regarding Latin American dictatorships can be reduced (deconstructed) to:

a nostalgic sentiment toward authoritarianism, which seems to be imbedded in certain societies. When democratic governments fall into a climate of crisis or chaos, many citizens [which ones are not specified, though it is not hard to guess] lack the patience for a gradual reform of institutions and quickly demand the return of the *mano dura* (strong hand). The Brazilian coup of March 1964 set off a chain reaction of military takeovers in Bolivia (1971), Uruguay (1973), Chile (1973), and Argentina (1976). (17)

Lopez-Calvo completely disregards the well-documented U.S. role in producing this “domino effect” by facilitating these military takeovers, as well as imposing the self-serving neoliberal economic “reforms” described in detail by Naomi Klein.<sup>64</sup> It is no coincidence that the term “domino effect” was also the main trope employed in rhetorical justifications for simultaneous U.S. aggression in Indochina, to which Yuniors/Diaz sarcastically refers in *Oscar Wao*, directly linking Washington’s assault on Vietnam to the 1965 invasion that enabled the “democratization of Santo Domingo” (5). The

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<sup>64</sup> Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Picador, 2007.

Vietnam War was a similar U.S. project of “democratization,” crushing popular resistance and leaving behind approximately four million corpses -- according to CIA estimates. Yunion comments that the U.S. military’s humiliation in Vietnam was payback for the Dominican invasion, “a little gift from my people . . . a small repayment for an unjust war” (4).<sup>65</sup>

For Jacqueline Loss, Balaguer is merely an “authoritarian,” a regrettable, although necessary option -- unless, of course, we are discussing Fidel Castro or Hugo Chavez; for Lopez-Calvo, Balaguer is somewhat “inefficient,” though otherwise admirable. The fact that Balaguer was not content with just twelve years of Trujillo-style autocratic rule from 1966 to 1978 (when he outdid his master in perpetrating large scale atrocities), deserves no attention, or mention. According to Chomsky and Herman (offering an account that Moya Pons corroborates):

the military intervened more comprehensively to avert Balaguer’s defeat in May, 1978, seizing ballot boxes and arresting or driving underground many leaders of the PRD [Bosch’s party when he was elected in 1963, prior to being overthrown by the U.S-supported military coup in which Balaguer played a central role], before pressure from both the Dominican elite and the Carter administration eventually forced the military and Balaguer to allow a transfer of power to Guzman. A wealthy landowner himself, Guzman would not have been running at all, and would not have been allowed to take office, if he posed a threat of serious reform. (245)

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<sup>65</sup> For a detailed account of the circumstances and events of the 1965 U.S. invasion, See Dan Kurzman, *Santo Domingo: Revolt of the Damned* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1965).

As Moya Pons makes clear, Balaguer remained a major force in Dominican politics, leaving a trail of similar electoral abuses, right through the presidential election of 2004. Lopez-Calvo disregards the facile ideological assumptions underlying Vargas Llosa's valorization of Balaguer as an urbane, sophisticated, democracy-promoting substitute for Trujillo; he also ignores Balaguer's long-standing official function as eloquent apologist for the tyrant, failing to mention that the title of his own book is taken from a speech Balaguer gave on Trujillo's behalf in the 1930s, in the midst of early atrocities.

Lopez-Calvo also concurs with Vargas Llosa's gratuitous claims about the Catholic Church's valiant opposition to the dictator -- once again, completely ignoring the collaboration of elitist international institutions in supporting the Trujillo dictatorship, a crucial factor for understanding what Junot Diaz is implying by his concept of the fuku, and how the chronic curse of lethal greed that was introduced into the New World by Columbus has persisted down through the centuries to the present time. Lopez-Calvo would have us believe that Vargas Llosa offers a balanced and presumably accurate description of the Vatican's role:

*The Feast* exposes the two faces of the Catholic Church. On the one hand, Father Rodriguez Canela [a lowly military chaplain] represents the traditional and institutional sector that has historically sided with established power. . . . By contrast, a more positive image of the Church prevails thanks to the antihegemonic measures tenaciously taken by the Papal Nuncio, the five bishops of the country and several priests, which outweigh the collusion of the other cases (40).

Once again, Lopez-Calvo simply dismisses inconvenient historical facts, such as the Church's consistent support for Trujillo throughout his regime, epitomized in the 1954 Concordant that Trujillo signed with Pius XII in Rome, where the two leaders had their picture taken together to commemorate the ceremony. Lopez-Calvo fails to mention that Trujillo's pressure on the local hierarchy for official designation as "Benefactor of the Church" contributed significantly to the conflict that developed in 1960 (along with the fact that a newly elected Catholic President in the U.S., like Eisenhower before him, was having second thoughts about U.S. government support for the dictator after he began appropriating U.S. corporate-owned sugar plantations on the island in the late 1950s). Moreover, both Washington and Rome were also enduring increasing international embarrassment at the time due to the international uproar over the abduction of Jesus de Galindez, as well as the extreme repression directed against the Fourteenth of June Movement, which culminated in the murder of the Mirabel sisters.

Crassweller makes it clear that although the Catholic Church "was the most venerable institution in the land . . . in any political or social sense the Church was a nullity. Its officials, during the Era of Trujillo, had been most indulgent and complacent in the public sphere." This cordial relationship continued right up "until the middle of 1959." (382) The pleasant sense of reciprocity informing this mutually beneficial relationship began to change, however, after the June, 1959 invasion, and the severe repression that followed: "The government asked repeatedly for some public sign of Church approval" (382), which was not forthcoming. In October, a new Papal Nuncio -- the same one Lopez-Calvo extols, Archbishop Lino Zanini -- arrived in Santo Domingo; Juan Peron, who was living in exile in the Dominican Republic as Trujillo's guest,

warned his host that this same Papal Nuncio's arrival in Argentina had marked a swift change in the Church's relationship with the Argentinean dictator, which quickly led to Peron's downfall. Crassweller quotes a remark, which he comments was "typical" of this Papal representative, made to a high Dominican official in January, 1960: "That man [Trujillo]," the archbishop commented. "doesn't know whom he's getting mixed up with. Everyone who has opposed me has died" (380), a statement one might more readily associate with the Inquisition than "the more positive image" that Lopez-Calvo suggests.

On Sunday morning, January 31, 1960, the Pastoral Letter read from every pulpit in the Dominican Republic signaled a sharp shift in Church policy; according to Crassweller, the pastoral letter showed that Dominican bishops had experienced a sudden change of heart regarding Trujillo, for the document asserted that it is "a grave offense against God . . . to suppress the democratic rights of freedom of conscience, press, and assembly, and the defense of these rights comes before the rights of any State" (383). One can only wonder, if the bishops were truly serious about this, why it took them so long to notice the regime's longstanding, flagrant abuses. Furthermore, the Catholic Church experienced no such qualms regarding Balaguer's reign of terror during the ensuing decades.

As for U.S. policy during the heyday of the Trujillo regime, and Washington's consistent support for Balaguer in subsequent decades, Lopez-Calvo prefers a different interpretation than scholarly research might suggest; U.S. influence, it seems, can be written off as just one more subjective construction, among many:

By 'othering' the hegemonic foreign powers that have controlled the island throughout history, the animadversion on both Spanish and U.S.

imperialism facilitates the articulation of a Dominican identity in Trujillato narratives. Therefore, the search for the unity of the Dominican culture is established and defined by reclaiming its colonial past against those ‘strategically essentialized’ foreign intruders who have tried to impose their values on the island. (40)

It seems difficult to determine for sure, in effect, if there ever was, or is, or even could be any real problem with U.S. or European imperialism in the Dominican Republic, for one cannot know for certain when one is simply dealing with “strategically essentialized” entities that facilitate socially constructed discourse -- with a mirage, in effect. Spain and the United States might well be mere byproducts of language that is simply “writing itself,” or perhaps delusions fostered by magical realism. Once again, the important point here is not to quibble with Lopez-Calvo’s poststructuralist assumptions, but rather to consider the crucial significance of the fuku in Junot Diaz’s novel.

It is interesting that for Lopez-Calvo, any discussion of U.S. imperialism necessarily involves “strategic essentializing,” yet his own totalizing claims regarding the benevolent role of the Catholic Church constitute self-evident truth, along with his sweeping endorsement of Vargas Llosa’s version of a civilized, democratically-inclined Balaguer, who, Llosa and Lopez-Calvo would have us believe, was the lone good guy among the jackals within the Trujillato all along, just waiting for the chance to show his true colors. Of course, none of this is stated boldly; we are invited to perceive “two sides” of the Church, even if the comparison of a military chaplain with a Papal Nuncio clearly loads the argument heavily in favor of Lopez-Calvo’s essentializing approbation, as well

as his implicit claims about the Church's role as standard bearer for moral truth and champion of social justice in Trujillo's Dominican Republic.

Lopez-Calvo's claims become even more problematic when one compares them with Piero Gleijeses's conclusion regarding Church policy toward Trujillo: "with a loyalty worthy of a better cause, the [Catholic] clergy never missed a chance to demonstrate ardent support for the regime," beginning with Archbishop Ricardo Pittini in Santo Domingo, "a man . . . lavish in his praise of the dictator" (339). The Church's support was not merely local -- nor simply the result of political pressure from Trujillo, as Crassweller suggests when he mentions the retraction of the original Pastoral Letter by Dominican bishops in January, 1961 (389); rather, according to Gleijeses,

the Church's blessing came from far beyond the Republic itself. In Rome two popes -- Pius XI and Pius XII -- showed their approval: there were decorations, which the Jefe relished, special blessings, and, in 1954, the highly un-Catholic annulment of Trujillo's first marriage. . . . Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, a powerful prince of the Church and influential in American politics, applauded Trujillo's 'religious and anti-communist policies' . . . blind to the rest. (339)

Nor did consistent Church support through the worst of Trujillo's crimes go unrewarded; according to Gleijeses, "In return for such devotion, Trujillo gave to the Catholic Church a privileged status relative to other faiths. Above all, he granted generous economic benefits both to the Church as an institution and to individual priests as well. The Church became rich" (339), a factor that warrants consideration as part of the relevant historical context, one would think, and that raises serious questions about

the totalizing claims of generally benevolent influence inferred by Vargas Llosa and reinforced by Lopez-Calvo. Certainly, “strategic essentializing” aside, such facts from the historical record deserve serious attention -- unless, of course, *all* historical narratives are questionable, since all are merely subjective constructs. Yet if the latter is the case, how is it that Lopez-Calvo can feel so confident that his interpretation, following Vargas Llosa (whom he elaborately praises), must be regarded as the only correct lens through which to view our topic? This insistence on ideological preference is what Diaz refers to in comparing writers to dictators in the often cited footnote on page 97 of *Oscar Wao*, where it seems obvious that Diaz has Vargas Llosa foremost in mind.

Jacqueline Loss, to her credit, mentions that one must include Balaguer’s economic policies as important context for Diaz’s fiction: “the effects of socio-economic policies of the 1970s and 1980s on already impoverished communities of people of color form a principal backdrop of Diaz’s writing” (807). Yet she does not elaborate further on just what those policies were, nor what their effects have been, and continue to be, nor does she allude to the fact that these same policies continue to be driven by neoliberal doctrine -- “the Washington consensus.” Neoliberal economic policies, in Chomsky’s words, generally involve “great profits for foreign investors, and a life of luxury for local elites; [along with] increasing misery for the general population” (184).<sup>66</sup> Extreme impoverishment for the vast majority, and the overwhelming suffering that it entails, is a crucial aspect of the fuku.

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<sup>66</sup> *Year 501*.



Junot Diaz makes it obvious that there is plenty of evidence for both exclusive luxury and widespread misery in today's Dominican Republic. The narrator in "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars" takes his girlfriend, Magdalena, reluctantly, to

The Resort That Shame Forgot . . . the largest, wealthiest resort on the Island, which means it's a goddamn fortress, walled away from everybody else . . . Advertises itself in the States as its own country, and it might as well be. Has its own airport, thirty-six holes of golf, beaches so white they ache to be trampled, and the only Island Dominicans you're guaranteed to see are either caked up or changing your sheets (13-14)<sup>67</sup>

-- or serving breakfast "in Aunt Jemima costumes." (14) This resort is neo-colonial territory that has been expropriated for profit and pleasure by the global plutocracy, reserved for the exclusive benefit of privileged elites:

Casa de Campo has got beaches the way the rest of the Island has got problems. These, though, have no meringue, no little kids, nobody trying to sell you chicharrones, and there's a massive melanin deficit in evidence. Every fifty feet there's at least one Eurofuck beached out on a towel like some scary pale monster that the sea's vomited up. They look like philosophy professors, like budget Foucaults, and too many of them are in the company of a dark-assed Dominican girl. I mean it, these girls can't be no more than sixteen . . . You can tell by their inability to communicate that these two didn't meet back in their Left Bank days. (15)

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<sup>67</sup> Diaz, Junot. *This Is How You Lose Her*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

Adopting street expressions like “caked up,” colloquial grammar such as “I mean it, these girls can’t be no more,” and scathing terms like “Eurofuck” helps Diaz articulate the instinctive outrage Dominicans feel at the obvious injustice of neo-imperial exploitation. The sarcastic references to “budget Foucaults” suggests the irrelevance of poststructuralist theory for interrogating the gross violations of fundamental human rights that this extremist economic “binary” entails.

The socio-economic policies of the 1970s and 1980s imposed by Balaguer that Loss refers to provide the pertinent background for the pervasive social injustices that Diaz addresses; these policies included, according to Chomsky and Herman, “widespread venality” and corruption:

U.S. firms get business done in the Dominican Republic not only by payoffs but by putting important people on their payrolls and by building both personal and financial ties to the local elite. . . . Gulf & Western is the largest private landowner and employer in the country, with some 8% of all arable land. . . . foreign interests . . . jointly dominate and loot this small dependency. (246-247)

There is “strong reliance on foreign investment for national development . . . great stress has been placed on tourism” (247) and tourism-related industries such as resort hotels and airports, encouraged by “generous tax and duty exemptions . . . and guaranteed capital and profit repatriation. U.S. companies have swarmed into agriculture, food processing, mining, banking and hotel and resort complexes” (247), as well as industrial zones, abetted by “effective government pacification of the labor force . . . systematic police terror since 1965 has returned the large urban proletariat and sub-proletariat to the desired

state of passivity,” (248) accepting “low wage rates, running between 25 and 50 cents an hour” (248).

These so-called neo-liberal reforms have been made possible because “unions have been broken and pacified . . . [through] regular use of government troops and police” (248). All this has led to “sharp deterioration in the well-being of the bulk of the population” (250); according to the *Wall Street Journal* (9 September 1971), “Malnutrition is widespread. . . . At last count, less than 1% of farmers owned 47.5% of the land. . . . Most Dominican children don’t go beyond third grade; only one in five reaches sixth grade’ ” (250). There has been an:

absolute fall in the real income of the majority and . . . the nutritional deficit of the Dominican majority is huge. Michael Flannery cites a report which states that in 1972 ‘a mere 11 percent of Dominicans drink milk, 4 percent eat meat and 2 percent eat eggs. Fish are plentiful in the waters off the island, but draw better prices in other markets. So, few Dominicans include fish in their protein-poor diet.’ (250-251)

Thus, in the Dominican Republic

we see the working out once again of the familiar repression-exploitation-trickle-down model of economic growth. The export-oriented agriculture is, as is common throughout [Latin America], displacing an already underemployed peasantry and rural work force, increasing the mass of dispossessed and malnourished. The unemployment rate has been extraordinarily high, on the order of 30%-40%. The mass of the

population has been entirely excluded from any opportunities for economic advancement, education, or political participation. (245-251)<sup>68</sup>

There can be no doubt that Junot Diaz wants us to consider the human suffering caused by these neoliberal economic policies as crucial background for his short stories as well as for *Oscar Wao*. In “Ysrael,” the opening selection in *Drown*, this context is referenced on the very first page; Yunior and his brother have to be sent to stay with relatives in the countryside during vacation because “[Mama] worked long hours at the chocolate factory [an export commodity] and didn’t have the time or the energy to look after us during the months school was out” (3).<sup>69</sup> There is also an implicit suggestion that similar economic hardship may have caused Ysrael to be neglected as an infant, leaving him exposed to mauling by a pig. In “No Face” we learn that Ysrael must depend on charity to receive the reconstructive surgery he desperately needs; he is waiting for an opportunity to travel to Canada for treatment, which his parish priest is attempting to arrange on his behalf. A similar lack of adequate medical care in impoverished rural areas of the Caribbean is reflected in Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*; Kitty is sent to a district hospital at the age of seven, suffering from tonsillitis, and is operated on under shockingly primitive conditions by a surgeon who is available to treat patients only one day a month.<sup>70</sup>

In “Aguantando,” Yunior mentions that his mother is “putting in ten-, twelve-hour shifts for almost no money at all” (71). The two boys -- already deprived of their father, who has followed the Diaspora trail to the North, where he works as many as twenty

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<sup>68</sup> *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume I*, 245-48, 250-51.

<sup>69</sup> Diaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

<sup>70</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*. New York: Plume, 1984, pp. 138-141.

hours per day at several jobs for only slightly higher wages -- receive little attention even when they are at home:

We could never get Mami to do anything after work, even cook dinner, if she didn't first sit awhile in her rocking chair. She didn't want to hear nothing about our problems, the scratches we'd put on our knees, who said what. She'd sit on the back patio with her eyes closed and let the bugs bite mountains onto her arms and legs. (73)

The family's abject poverty is obvious in the typical food the boys eat for dinner:

"Almost everything on our plates was boiled: boiled yucca, boiled platano, boiled guineo, maybe with a piece of cheese or a shred of bacalao" (70). Along with this meager diet comes "our annual case of worms," which requires Mami to skimp even further on meals in order to purchase the necessary medicine.

The boys' mother cannot buy proper clothing for school, or even basic supplies such as pencils: "we couldn't afford the uniforms or proper mascotas. The uniforms Mami could do nothing about but with the mascotas she improvised, sewing together sheets of loose paper she had collected from friends. We each had one pencil and if we lost that pencil . . . we had to stay home from school until Mami could borrow another one for us" (71). Unsanitary living conditions also prevent proper hygiene, which adds to the boys' daily humiliation in the presence of classmates who "wouldn't look at us, tried to hold their breath when we were close to them" (71). Yunion refers to his mother "examining the scabs on the back of my shaved head" (74); Ysrael encounters similar damage, presumably from lice infestation, when he caresses his little brother: "when he rubs the four year-old's head he feels the sores that have healed into yellow crusts" (159).

Throughout the stories, we are confronted again and again with the harsh reality of the fuku of lower class Dominican poverty: “I can’t remember how many times I crouched over our [outdoor] latrine, my teeth clenched, watching long gray parasites slide out between my legs” (70-71). Yuniór’s neighborhood is overrun with rats big enough to be “running off with kids” (72); his uncle turns neighborhood rodent extermination into a full-time occupation. It is clear that living conditions for Dominicans have actually grown worse under Balaguer, based on the uncle’s pointed comment about better circumstances under Trujillo: “he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca, when the United States wasn’t something people planned on [for the sake of survival]” (72-73).

Richard Turits elucidates the background for this attitude, which Díaz/Yuniór comments on further in *Oscar Wao* as being commonly shared among the poor in the Dominican Republic to this day (see 78 and 112, for just two examples). Turits describes the agrarian reform program promoted by Trujillo, beginning in 1934, as a populist measure designed to secure strong public support in the face of traditional elite resistance during the early years of the dictatorship:

The regime’s early ideology of establishing a nation of small, independent agriculturalists clashed with the [traditional] practice of sharecropping, which was represented as inequitable and a disincentive to expanding production beyond subsistence needs. . . . If lands were not being worked, they were considered ‘nobody’s lands’ by the regime. And, as such, they were available for distribution. (100, 103-104)

As a result, “Peasants were acquiring [for the first time] the basis for private property,” small farms of their own. (104)<sup>71</sup>

As bad as the poverty endured by Rafa and Yunion clearly is, the fuku of extreme poverty in the countryside, where babies are exposed, for example, to attack by voracious pigs, is even more horrifying. These conditions receive detailed scrutiny in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” the final selection in *This Is How You Lose Her*. The narrator (whose parallel with Diaz seems so exact the story almost reads like a chapter in a memoir) describes his visit to “the Nadalands”: “shit, your family came up out of those spaces. Squatter chawls where there are no roads, no lights, no running water, no grid, no anything, where everybody’s slapdash house is on top of everybody else’s, where it’s all mud and shanties and modos and grind and thin smiling motherfuckers everywhere without end, like falling off the rim of civilization” (203). It is difficult to imagine anyone enjoying any kind of quality of life under such intensely crowded, degrading conditions: “Seems like everybody is missing teeth. . . . Baby Mama’s place is barely two rooms, one bed, one chair, a little table, a single lamp overhead. More mosquitoes than a refugee camp. Raw sewage in the back. . . . When it rains . . . everything goes” (203-04). Instinctive empathy and compassion tell the observer that there is something profoundly wrong in this situation, that such suffering should never be inflicted on an innocent child: “He is a piercingly cute carjito. . . . You are suddenly overcome with the urge to cover him with your arms, with your whole body” (205). The narrator is anxious to detach himself from this appalling misery, yet remains deeply troubled by the inner voice of conscience, realizing that for the child there is no such escape: “The boy is watching you

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<sup>71</sup> Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford U P, 2003.

with lapidary intensity. The mud is waiting. The mosquito bites are waiting. The Nada is waiting” (207).

The narrative strategy of direct address that Diaz employs here is particularly effective for drawing the reader into the poignant emotion of the situation, as if asking him or her, “What if this kind of treatment was being inflicted on *your* child?”, which is exactly what the narrator’s friend, Elvis, the Iraq veteran, is hoping the little boy will turn out to be -- the son he imagined having when he lay seriously wounded in Iraq (yet another country devastated by Washington’s neo-imperial military adventurism). After the blood test results prove otherwise, Elvis initially attempts to excise the little boy from his life, mind and memory, disappointed that the child does not share his DNA, yet he eventually returns to the Dominican Republic once again, looking for the little boy and his mother -- sadly, after it is too late to reestablish contact. Diaz’s inference is clear: feelings of instinctive empathy and compassion, of solidarity with others, are what make us truly human; repressing such innate moral sensibilities results in profound self-diminishment, and detracts from the core quality of one’s experience in life.

Adverse socio-economic conditions -- perpetuated under a capitalist system and severely exacerbated due to the dogma of neoliberalism -- are also crucial for understanding the formidable obstacles faced by immigrants arriving in the U.S.; this is articulated in painful detail and with particular poignancy in “Negocios.”<sup>72</sup> There are numerous references in *Oscar Wao* to the severe hardships of working conditions in the neoliberal North, as well. Beli finds herself “freezing in basement apartments in the

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<sup>72</sup> See pp. 170-71, 174, 177-79, 181, 183-84, 188, 190, 194, 203. This crucial context receives insufficient attention, in my view, in critical analyses that focus primarily on *machismo*, such as Natalie J. Friedman’s “Adultery and Immigrant Narratives.” *MELUS* 34 (2009): 71-93.



Bronx and working her fingers to the bone” (137), suffering “the backbreaking drudgery of the factorias” (164), working two jobs, with “the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set” (14). In *This Is How You Lose Her*, the narrator of “Otravida, Otravez” makes it clear that most immigrants experience nothing but bitter disillusion in the land of opportunity, despite their dreams of a better life in the North; Ramon, after “all the jobs he’s had and the money he’s saved,” is only able to purchase a rundown, dilapidated house in a dangerous neighborhood -- and he is one of the rare exceptions: “How many get to this point? Only the ones who never swerve, who never make mistakes, who are never unlucky” (57).

For the rest, there is just the crushed hope of “Hundreds of dead lottery tickets” (58), along with the deep melancholy of exile, the persistent longing for a homeland “which you never think of until it’s gone, which you never love until you’re no longer there.” Diaspora leads to isolation and disappointment: “Most of the people I know in the States have no friends here; they’re crowded together in apartments. They’re cold, they’re lonely, they’re worn” (60), working long, exhausting hours for barely adequate wages, unable to take breaks or days off due to illness: “we don’t have those kinds of bosses” (59). Desperation and despair fuel the pervasive drug dependence and deadly addiction depicted in “Aurora,” “Drown,” and “Boyfriend,” as well -- tragic, yet inevitable consequences of the harsh circumstances and oppressive living conditions in northern inner-city ghettos, and further manifestations of the insidious fuku.

Not at all coincidentally, Yuniór’s account in “Aguantando” contains several references to the U.S. invasion in 1965, which ensured continuation of Trujillato-style rule via the less ostentatious, and therefore less politically embarrassing -- but no less

vicious -- Balaguer, who enthusiastically, and with extreme violence, implemented the neoliberal agenda insisted upon by his Washington masters. The photograph of Papi that Yuniors recalls most often is a shot “taken two days before the invasion,” during which Papi served on the side of what Chomsky and Herman refer to as “the subfascists” (247); Papi is dressed in his Guardia uniform -- the domestic military organization formed by U.S. Marines during the U.S. occupation of 1916-1924, from which Rafael Trujillo emerged as a star pupil. The Guardia Nacional, guided by its North American officers, employed extremely brutal tactics against Dominicans, as similar U.S.-created National Guards did to local populations in Haiti and Nicaragua; in each case, these local militias were intended to ensure that proper socio-economic order was maintained after the U.S. military had repressed popular resistance, imposed governments favorable to U.S. business interests, and then withdrawn from a direct imperial role.<sup>73</sup>

Bruce J. Calder comments that the Marines, who were notorious for their overt racism in the Dominican Republic, engaged in widespread atrocities, including indiscriminate terror, rape, torture, and murder; Guardia Nacional members, whom Calder characterizes as “paramilitary auxiliaries” (675) (a familiar instrument of repression in U.S. client states), were anxious to impress their foreign masters, and so typically took this pattern of abuse to further extremes, inspiring fear and dread among their fellow citizens. Rafael Trujillo became a favorite of his Marine mentors because of his efficiency, that is, his unhesitating brutality, and thus rose to the top of the Guardia

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<sup>73</sup> Calder, Bruce J. “Caudillos and *Gavilleros* versus the United States Marines: Guerilla Insurgency during the Dominican Intervention, 1916-1924.” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58 (1978): 649-675. Calder notes that establishment of national guards was typical practice in “the implementation of Wilsonian diplomacy in Latin America.” Detailed information on Marine “diplomacy” in Haiti and Nicaragua can be found in Chomsky’s *Year 501*.

ranks, a position that facilitated his bloody military coup in 1930, while the U.S. government calmly looked the other way, assured of continuing stability, which generally, in U.S. vocabulary, translates to favorable investment climate.<sup>74</sup>

There can be no doubt that the U.S. role in causing severe, continuous social injustice in the Dominican Republic is a major concern in Diaz's fiction, and that such injustice is central to what he means by the fuku. Mami, we learn in "Aguantando," features "across her stomach and back the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965" (71). Miss Lora tells Yunion that she and her mother both lived at one time in La Vega, where Yunion's mother "recuperated after the Civil War" (154). The white man who sells the rundown house to Ramon in "Otravida, Otravez" informs him condescendingly that he served in the U.S. Army during the 1965 invasion, and that he retains fond memories of the experience: "Nice people, he says. Beautiful people" (63). Diaz makes it clear that for most Dominicans, U.S. intervention in 1965 is viewed with a lingering sense of outrage. Ybon Pimental's boyfriend, "the capitan," "earned his stripes" by assisting U.S. troops in crushing popular support for Juan Bosch; he now continues working for Balaguer: "Shooting at sindicatos from the backseats of cars. Burning down organizers' homes. Smashing in people's face with crowbars" (294).

The fact that Mami's injuries in the Civil War occurred while Papi served in the Guardia Nacional suggests that the marital abuse and neglect she suffers at the hands of

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<sup>74</sup> Roorda, Eric. *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945*. Duke U P, 1998. Roorda explains that U.S. support for Trujillo was ambivalent at first; Secretary of State Sumner Welles originally opposed Trujillo's takeover of the government, but Secretary of State Cordell Hull later provided firm support, in the name of "civil order" (83). U.S. support was even stronger following World War II; Roorda observes that after 1945, "The Good Neighbor Policy, under which U.S. diplomats had maintained uneffusive (and at times even embarrassed) relations with [Latin American] dictators, changed into a full regional alliance, under which new forms of defensive and economic assistance actively fostered such regimes" (193).

her husband actually includes a socio-political context we should consider, quite apart from the totalizing concept of Dominican *machismo* emphasized by critics such as John Riofrio,<sup>75</sup> Natalie J. Friedman,<sup>76</sup> and Jason Frydman.<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that masculine identity, male violence, oppressive patriarchy, and chronic philandering are not key themes in Diaz's writing, but rather that these themes need to be examined in the light of a broader paradigm, as well. Riofrio argues that "Ysrael" involves a search for masculine identity on the part of Rafa and his younger brother, and that the violence they enact against the boy with no face is simply an expression of their desire to appear macho. Yet such an interpretation seems incomplete; there may well be even deeper sources for the destructive rage they take out on others.

Both boys cannot help but feel betrayed by their inexplicable abandonment by their absent father; Yunior mentions in "Aguantando" that, "He had left for Nueva York when I was four but since I couldn't remember a single moment with him I excused him from all nine years of my life"(70). If one correlates this sense of betrayal with the findings of Alice Miller in *Drama of the Gifted Child*, as well as her further studies, one can perceive Rafa's violence in particular -- he smashes the unsuspecting Ysrael over the head with a coke bottle, while Yunior only throws stones at him from a distance -- as sociopathic behavior stemming from repressed anger over the father's absence, anger that is exacerbated by the degrading poverty of his youthful existence. Rafa's rage expresses itself through his constant degrading abuse of his little brother, and also through his

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<sup>75</sup> Riofrio, John. "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy and Emasculation in Junot Diaz's *Drown*." 28 (2008): 23 ff.

<sup>76</sup> Friedman, Natalie S. "Adultery and the Immigrant Narrative." *Melus* 34.3 (2009).

<sup>77</sup> Frydman, Jason. "Violence, Masculinity, and Upward Mobility in the Dominican Diaspora: Junot Diaz, the Media, and *Drown*." *Columbia Journal of American Studies* 8 (2007): 270-281.

continuous contempt, disdain for, and mistreatment of girls, which are manifest throughout “Ysrael” and “Fiesta, 1980” in *Drown*, and also “Nilda” and “The Pura Principle” in *This Is How You Lose Her*.<sup>78</sup>

Yunior, in contrast, appears to be more of a shocked and horrified witness to Rafa’s arbitrary, heartless brutality toward No Face, than an enthusiastic participant in his brother’s violence. Yunior’s response to the family predicament generally seems to be more that of passive victim than active transgressor. We see this in his timid responses to Rafa and the man who pinches his penis on the bus, his dread of his father’s wrath in “Fiesta, 1980,” as well as his reluctant compliance with Beto’s sexual demands in the title story, “Drown.” Yunior’s repressed anger is apparent only in “Invierno,” when he refuses to remain indoors while the father is at work. Yunior reveals a gentler disposition compared to his brother; he has a closer relationship with his mother, even though she privileges Rafa as the first-born son: “she was always a hundred percent on his side, as only a Latin mom can be with her querido oldest hijo” (“The Pura Principle,” 107). In “Fiesta, 1980,” Yunior expresses grateful affection for the kindness his mother shows him in the face of his father’s severity: “Mami must have caught me studying her because she stopped what she was doing and gave me a smile . . . Suddenly I wanted to go over and hug her, for no other reason than I loved her” (41-42).

This spirit of spontaneous love that Yunior expresses for his mother permeates all of Junot Diaz’s writing in one way or another, even the passages that reflect exasperation, outrage over injustice, and desperation bordering on despair. Implicit in all of Diaz’s

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<sup>78</sup> *Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. This is the first in a series of thirteen books Miller devoted to the topic of the long-term consequences of child neglect and abuse.

fiction is the assumption that mutually nourishing solidarity among human beings, arising from innate, instinctive feelings of empathy and compassion, and demonstrated through acts of simple kindness, can dignify individual persons and stabilize communities, ennoble human life, and guarantee enduring social harmony. Human love is the only possible fana, or counter spell, for the legacy of Columbus -- the greed and violence embodied in the longstanding curse of the fuku.

We find numerous examples of this core belief and abiding conviction throughout the stories in *Drown*: Yuniors tree climbing and playful teasing to evoke a smile from his mother after she arrives home exhausted from work; Mami's reassuring ministrations when her little boy throws up yet again in his father's new van; the discouraged boyfriend's persistent passion for and stubborn loyalty to Aurora; Yuniors taking his mother shopping on Saturday afternoons and providing her with money so she won't have to search through the discount bins; No Face's daily flirtation with the mute girl in the house across from the church; Yuniors visiting his father's second wife to commiserate with the abandoned mother of his unfamiliar half-brother. Similar manifestations of human kindness abound in *This Is How You Lose Her*: Yuniors sympathy and concern for Rafa's neglected girlfriend, Nilda; the hospital laundry manager loaning half her life savings to disconsolate, homesick Samantha; the tenderness demonstrated in Miss Lora's gentle maternal affection; the professor's patience and solicitation for his pregnant former law-student lover. There are countless manifestations of the healing power of human love throughout the pages of *Oscar Wao*, as well, including the loving care La Inca bestows upon Beli, along with her devotion to Beli's children, Lola's fierce dedication to her

younger brother, the Chinese restaurant staff's courageous rescue of Beli from La Fea's thugs, and Clives's selfless loyalty to Oscar in the cane field, to name just a few.

Junot Diaz's exposes the avaricious malevolence that precipitates needless tragedy in what could otherwise be harmonious, mutually beneficial human affairs; in *Oscar Wao*, Diaz makes it clear that there is nothing mysterious about the fuku, and that the fana necessary for escaping the doom of Melkor and breaking the spell of devastating violence and greed can be found only in the wellsprings of conscience that reside deep within the human heart. Diaz assumes that human beings are born with an innate understanding and respect for human rights, and that the savage injustices we witness throughout history and the world around us are the result of perversions that humanity has the power to overcome through individual transformation, along with determined collective effort to establish functioning democracy based on firm principles of social justice.

Diaz's sardonic tone in referring to evil "that not even postmodernism can explain away" (296) underlines the fundamental importance of the basic truth it implies: that the crucial difference between good and evil is a core binary that not even the most subtle, sophisticated intellectual posturing can rationalize or deconstruct, despite endless claims about moral ambiguity and cultural relativism. All human beings possess a commonly shared, intuitive understanding of the basic difference between right and wrong, an inborn ethical understanding that firmly supports the sacrosanct value of life as well as the supreme priority of fundamental human rights.

## Julia Alvarez and the Neoliberal Novel

There is a significant contrast between the fictional representations of the Dominican Republic and its historical background in the work of Junot Diaz, compared to the literary depictions offered by Julia Alvarez, a contrast attributable in large part to the different class perspectives of each author. Diaz focuses on the struggles of the underprivileged, the poor, and the disenfranchised, both in the Dominican Republic and among Dominican immigrants who seek a better life in the United States, where they suffer further deprivation and abuse. Diaz also, from the very first sentence of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, highlights the genocidal legacy of the Conquest and the slave trade, along with the racist class system of domination and exploitation that continues right through Trujillo's regime into the neoliberal present. Alvarez, on the other hand, minimizes and even trivializes the historical background, ignores problems of pervasive social injustice, and focuses, for the most part, on her salutary role as a writer instead. For Alvarez, the neoliberal world as it presents itself, at least from a North American perspective, seems to be about as good as it gets.

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz finds many similarities between the writing of Diaz and Alvarez, maintaining that, in the stories of both authors, "references to the protagonists' memories of local customs on the island, the squalid living conditions, and Trujillo's dictatorship together with the consequences it had for many families, are abundant" (216).<sup>79</sup> Yet impoverished Dominicans and "squalid living conditions" do not appear often, if at all, in Alvarez's texts; one of the few exceptions might be Jose, in "The

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<sup>79</sup> Ibarrola-Armendariz, Aitor. "Dominican-American Auto-ethnographies: Considering the Boundaries of Self-Representation in Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz." *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 23 (2010): 213-229.



night watchman” chapter of *Yo!*, although even in that instance the character does not suffer from but is only threatened with destitution; the land that his family has farmed for generations is slated to be appropriated for the construction of a dam in the near future. Yolanda benevolently rescues Jose from this predicament by hiring him as the night watchman for one of her uncle’s country estates after he appeals to her for employment. The grave injustice of overwhelming poverty persisting among the vast majority of Dominican citizens is thus conveniently sidestepped.

The word slavery does not even occur in Alvarez’s fiction until her fifth novel, *Saving the World*, and then it is barely mentioned, and only with passing sympathy (101-03, 107-09).<sup>80</sup> In her praise for *In the Time of Butterflies* and its usefulness for teaching students about Dominican and Caribbean history, Elizabeth Martinez notes that the narrative does not “specifically mention Haiti nor discuss Afro-Caribbean heritage,” so she recommends the 2001 Showtime film version to her students as “a helpful partner to Alvarez’s book for its representation of people of African heritage,” which is strikingly lacking in this as well as Alvarez’s other novels (111).<sup>81</sup> While Alvarez assures Dominicans in the Postscript to *In the Time of Butterflies* that her purpose in writing about the Mirabal sisters is to describe for North American readers the “nightmare you have endured and the heavy losses you suffered” (324),<sup>82</sup> people of color, who make up such a large portion of the Dominican population -- chiefly among the impoverished classes -- do not seem to merit particular consideration in her account. Alvarez does not

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<sup>80</sup> Alvarez, Julia. *Saving the World*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Martinez, Elizabeth. “Teaching Spanish Caribbean History Through *In the Time of Butterflies*: The Novel and the Showtime Film.” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. 5.2 (2006): 107-26. The massacre of Haitians receives only brief mention in Alvarez’s first novel via Fifi’s naïve account of how Chucha came to be a servant in the Garcia family.

<sup>82</sup> Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of Butterflies*. New York: Plume, 1995.

even mention Trujillo's massacre of 18,000 Haitians, the subject of Edwidge Danticat's profoundly moving *The Farming of Bones*; this massive racist atrocity is referenced only in the film version.

The pivotal scene in the novel, where Minerva slaps the dictator at a party celebrating the anniversary of Columbus's landing, includes just a cryptic comment about the problematic nature of that crucial historical event; Minerva mentions her "theory that the god of thunder Huracan always acts up around the holiday of the Conquistador, who killed off all his Taino devotees" (93). The term "devotees" seems oddly inappropriate, given the actual historical events, as described by eyewitnesses such as Bartolome de la Casas. Elsewhere in her fiction, Alvarez seems to take pride in being a direct descendant of conquistadors, disregarding their savage legacy; Fifi describes how the girls' father playfully subjects them to "the test of whether or not you inherited the blood of the Conquistadors . . . and laughs a great big Conquistador laugh that comes all the way from the green motherland hills of Spain" (197).<sup>83</sup> The glory of this admirable heritage becomes only marginally and casually nuanced when Laura Garcia reflects on how she will miss her island home after the family flees to New York:

Now everything she sees sharpens as if through the lens of loss . . . She thinks of her ancestors, those fair-skinned Conquistadors arriving in this new world, not knowing that the gold they sought was this blazing light. And look what they started, Laura thinks, looking up and seeing gold flash in the mouth of one of the *guardias* as it spreads open in a scared smile.

(212)

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<sup>83</sup> ---. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1991.

The *guardia* in question, apparently, is frightened because Tio Vic, the CIA man who rescues the family and arranges their departure to New York, has appeared on the scene to take charge of the situation. How plausible this depiction might be, given what the historical record reveals about the CIA's usual role in such instances, and the typical character and practices of Trujillo's thugs, is a matter for speculation. Yolanda continues to perceive herself as descended from tropical royalty after she assimilates to life in the United States; annoyed that her third husband manifests a condescending attitude toward what he regards as her island superstitions, Alvarez portrays Yolanda as insistent on her aristocratic ancestry: "If you stand her pedigree right next to his, he should be fanning her with a palm leaf or carting stones up her pyramid" (259).<sup>84</sup>

Jennifer Bess argues that *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* reflects both Edouard Glissant's notion of the need for a "shared history" based on collective understanding of a past which has been wiped out by colonizers -- and thus is inaccessible for victims of colonization in the Caribbean -- and Frantz Fanon's insistence that since victims of colonization cannot hope to find their identity in the past, they must reinvent their identity in the present. According to Bess, Alvarez sees herself as a descendant, and therefore a beneficiary, by virtue of her privileged class position, of Europeans who expropriated the islands -- the word "conquered" would be misleading because it implies that there was a degree of military balance involved in the contest. Yet Alvarez simultaneously considers herself to be a victim of the heritage of oppression and exploitation that her European ancestors created: according to Bess:

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<sup>84</sup> ---, *Yo!* New York: Plume, 1997.

the blood of the Conquistadors belongs to their heirs and victims alike. Thus, those who have enjoyed privilege and those who suffer without it suffer together in a history of loss. . . . a history in which the perpetrators of violation suffer an intense sense of exile and homelessness and thus share a sense of violation with those whom their ancestors have made to suffer. (86)<sup>85</sup>

It is certainly true that the members of the Garcia family suffer as a result of their forced exile; Yolanda experiences a sense of persistent displacement because she perceives herself as neither fully Dominican nor North American, but as hovering indeterminately somewhere in-between. Yet Alvarez's goal in processing self-invention via her fictional counterpart seems to be more focused on resolving personal identity issues than creating a shared understanding that adequately accounts for the experience of all players in the tragic drama of Caribbean colonialism. Spanish barbarity during the Conquest, along with extreme, degrading poverty persisting and steadily worsening into the present, seem hardly equivalent in their human toll to the psychological struggles, however painful, of those who abide in physical safety, with satisfied reassurance of more than ample resources to meet their long-term physical needs.

The notion of privileged class position and the security it guarantees permeates Alvarez's work; back home on the island, condescension bordering on contempt is reflected repeatedly in her family members' attitudes toward their domestic servants. In the opening chapter of *Garcia Girls*, a contrite servant "peeks" through a door with "clasped hands" to explain a delay in delivering an item from the kitchen, only to be

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<sup>85</sup> Bess, Jennifer. "Imploding the Miranda Complex in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. *College Literature* 34.1 (2007): 78-105.

scolded, ““*Por Dios*, *Illuminada*, you’ve had all day’.” Alvarez describes the servant in this encounter rather coyly as reminiscent of ““*a lover who pleadeth for mercy from his beloved*” (4). At the same time, the reader is invited to ponder the trials and tribulations of the ruling class, as one of Yolanda’s aunts laments: ““Can you imagine? A chauffeur who can’t keep a car in gasoline! Welcome home to your little island!’ ” (5). Armed guards are posted to protect the property, while flustered aunts complain of public unrest; on her subsequent excursion into the countryside, however, Yolanda perceives no reasonable cause for social discontent: “It is hard to believe the poverty the radio commentators keep talking about. There seems to be plenty here to eat” (13). Yolanda avoids taking a public bus on her trip, where she would risk mingling with ordinary Dominicans; the very mention of such a possibility arouses hilarity among her relatives: ““Can’t you see it!’ . . . ‘Yoyo climbing into an old *camioneta* with all the *campesinos* and their fighting cocks and their goats and their pigs!’ ”(9). Yolanda borrows a family vehicle instead; when she encounters a bus on the road, “men poke out of the windows, hooting and yelling, holding out bottles and beckoning to her. She speeds up and leaves them behind, the quiet, well-oiled Datsun climbing easily up the snaky highway” (13).

When her car gets a flat tire during her search for guavas, Yolanda’s first concern is possible sexual molestation by the *campesinos* she encounters; fortunately, they treat her with great respect, bordering on actual reverence, especially after she mentions her well-to-do relative who owns a nearby mansion, protected by the usual armed guards. Yolanda reflects on how the guard she observed when she approached the gate there seems “locked in a strangely gorgeous prison” (14) -- adorned with a chocolate brown Mercedes parked in front -- yet she accepts that same prison as the place of refuge and

welcome safety into which she can gratefully and hastily retreat after parting company with the campesinos. There is no suggestion whatsoever of latent tension in the social fabric due to class conflict or concern about economic injustice, or any sense of Yolanda's feeling uncomfortable at being imprisoned by privilege herself. Racial prejudice does not seem to play a role worth more than incidental attention in the overall situation in this opening chapter, either, although Yolanda carefully notes the dark complexion of one of the campesinos, as if this might signal danger; it is only later in the text, when the Garcia girls encounter racial slurs from their classmates in northern schoolyards, that the matter of racial bias becomes any cause for serious concern, and Yolanda begins to realize what it feels like to be regarded as "the Other."

Compared to the immigrant characters in Junot Diaz's fiction, members of the Garcia family make out quite well after arriving in the United States. Yolanda's wealthy grandfather provides necessary financial support from the outset, adequate for renting a spacious apartment and hiring a maid, and relatively soon, thanks to the father's medical degree, the family becomes sufficiently prosperous to purchase a house in the suburbs. In her essay "El Doctor," in *Something to Declare*, Alvarez describes her father "in the scene that labels him immigrant" (though not quite the typical immigrant that Junot Diaz describes) stacking money in piles on the bed that he shares with his wife: "He took from his back pocket a wad of bills so thick his hand could not close over it. And he began to count" (48).<sup>86</sup> Upon arriving at Sofia's for a family gathering after the birth of her baby girl:

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<sup>86</sup> ---. *Something to Declare*. New York: Plume, 1998.

the father distributed bulky envelopes that felt as if they were padded, and they were, no less than several hundreds in bills, tens and twenties and fives, all arranged to face the same way, the top one signed with the father's name, branding them his . . . . The father told them there was plenty more where that had come from. The revolution in the old country had failed. Most of his comrades had been killed or bought off. He had escaped to this country. And now it was every man for himself. (25)

The notion of the inevitable failure of any attempts at revolutionary reform -- “the revolution . . . had failed” -- becomes central in Alvarez's fiction, supporting a world view that serves for justifying her privileged class position, while she complacently ignores the kind of desperate poverty that Diaz describes as being so devastating in his characters' daily struggle for survival. The doctor's phrase “every man for himself” is disturbingly reminiscent of the social Darwinism that characterizes the neoliberal mentality, and recalls Francis Fukuyama's “end of history” thesis of the early 1990s, the supposed result of the so-called failure of socialism. How Alvarez articulates this notion at the close of *In the Time of Butterflies* calls for further elaboration; the salient issue here is that such a conclusion regarding global economics and geopolitics occurs all too easily to those who have become accustomed to a life of privilege, and thus find it convenient to underestimate the plight of the vast majority who languish in degrading impoverishment. For the Garcia sisters, the idea of social revolution reduces to an ebullient feminist project -- liberating Fifi from Manuel's patriarchal grasp and preventing an unwanted pregnancy. After their visit to the high class red light motel where Mordin “wickedly” takes them, the girls return to the luxurious Capri, where, “among the pink vanities with

baskets of little towels and talcum powder and brushes,” Yolanda spurs on her siblings with the exhortation “*Que viva la revolucion!*”, while the rebels “smile three churlish Che Guevara smiles” (124, 126,128).

In the early stages of the family’s adjustment to New York, before Papa begins piling stacks of bills on the bed every evening, there is evidence of lingering lament for the loss of accustomed luxury when the Garcias find themselves reduced to a mere taxi cab for transportation to dinner at a fancy night club in Manhattan with Doctor and Mrs. Fanning:

Sandi realized with a pang one of the things that had been missing in the last few months. It was precisely this kind of special attention paid to them. At home there had always been a chauffeur opening a door or a gardener tipping his hat and a half dozen maids and nursemaids acting as if the health and well-being of the de la Torre-Garcia children were of wide public concern. (174)

At home on the island, Doctor Garcia reveals an extremely patronizing attitude toward the servants in his household: “ ‘They’re like children,’ my father said tenderly when Gladys left the room” (266). Carla learns at an early age that it is unwise to share expensive gifts with underlings; Gladys has to be dismissed because “ ‘We can’t trust her’ ” -- after she has accepted a toy bank from Carla that Carla no longer wanted and had put away on a shelf (273). Yoyo comments that she has only seen “pee-ers” “on little naked beggar boys at the market” (230); this is one of the few allusions to actual poverty throughout all five of Alvarez’s novels. Another notable instance comes at the close of *In the Name of Salome*, when Camila asks a passing little boy called Duarte (after one of the



founders of the republic) to read the inscription on a gravestone for her; Duarte “is from Los Millones, a nearby barrio named not for the millionaires who do not live there but for the million poor who do” (352). Exactly how impoverished these many underprivileged among the fortunate few might be, or what their living conditions are like in the barrio, seems not to warrant further comment or consideration. Instead, Duarte serves as a prop for Camila to exhibit her benevolence as she begins teaching the unfortunate tyke the alphabet, by holding his hand and tracing over the letters on the gravestone.

In Alvarez’s version of geopolitics, Camila Henriquez Urena appears to be just as disillusioned with Castro’s Cuba as the average *The New York Times* subscriber; Alvarez seems to believe that the only enduring good to come out of that otherwise failed social experiment has been literacy education, although even that is woefully inadequate, and hopelessly crippled by ideological baggage. The point of view expressed in the text comes across as both arrogant and dismissive: “If there is one thing I hate about the revolution,” Camila confides in her nieces, “it is the sloppy use of language” (344).<sup>87</sup> The head of Castro’s literacy campaign (cynically referred to as a “jefe,” which was one of Trujillo’s nicknames) is barely literate himself: “His . . . letter was full of errors and messy efforts at correction. No doubt his secretary had been liberated to a cane harvest, and he had been left to type his own correspondence.” Alvarez describes the slogans at his letter’s end as particularly galling: “It was happening all over Cuba, overwrought, ideologically garbled language. . . . We were at the foot of our very own Tower of Babel, ideological as well as linguistic, and the exodus began , mostly of the rich who had the means to start over in the United States of America” (345). Members of the upper classes,

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<sup>87</sup> ---. *In the Name of Salome*. New York: Plume, 2001.

apparently, are fleeing revolutionary Cuba's "overwrought" ideology and language, rather than simply trying to protect their privileged social status and safeguard their exclusive wealth.

Alvarez's characterization of Castro's Cuba comes across as exaggerated, unfairly sarcastic, and completely one-sided; Camila's brother Rodolfo refers to Cuba "bitterly" as "the experiment that has failed," and she readily agrees, yet this seems a rather totalizing judgment. Her friend Nora Lavedan does mention that the wealthy who leave the country " 'don't want to admit that now their servants' children are getting schooled, and everyone can eat, and everyone can get medical care'," but then adds ruefully, "When there *is* food and medicine'," as if shortages in these areas stem from government inefficiency rather than the longstanding, harshly restrictive U.S. blockade. Nor is there any reference to the fact that the country's wealth is now more equitably redistributed, so that one does not find in Cuba the extreme economic disparities that produce the wretched poverty of barrios like Los Millones in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez's Camila Urena espouses the highest ideals, expressing earnest aspirations for achieving social justice in some vague, as yet unrealized future, even as she laments as "soiled" (342) and "failed" the "experiment" Castro has conducted. When Camila visits Domingo's grave, she derides the title of "comandante" ascribed to the "sharp-featured woman in her beret and combat boots" that she finds in charge there, while taking obvious personal pride in her own benevolent intentions: "Everyone was now in charge of something. That was the bad news. But the good news was very good: we were all in charge of taking care of each other. I could live, and die, for that, too." She goes along with the beret and combat boot charade, resigned in the realization that, "We had never

been allowed to govern ourselves. We were bound to get it wrong the first few times around” (346).

For Camila, or at least Alvarez’s version of Camila, her personal role as literacy educator and exponent of esoteric literary wisdom takes center stage in the Cuban nation’s struggle for social justice: “I had never thought of the real revolution as the one Fidel was commanding. The real revolution could only be won by the imagination. When one of my newly literate students picked up a book and read with hungry pleasure, I knew we were all closer to the patria we all wanted” (347); whether adequate nourishment and sufficient health standards for learners factor into this equation remains incidental in the promised land of “imagination.” Camila demonstrates the clear superiority of her vision when she sets aside the recommended doctrinal readings of Marx , Marti, and the Communist Party newspaper at a literacy brigade meeting one day, and shares a poem by her mother Salome instead, to the enthusiastic applause of all the inspired participants, despite the obvious dismay of the presumably combat-booted woman in charge of overseeing coffee bean production quotas: “And then, I told them her story, and when I was done, one by one, the women began to clack with their wooden spoons on the side of their tables, until the din in the room drowned out the companera, shouting for order, in the name of Fidel, in the name of the revolution” (348). It appears that Camila’s experience in Cuba has turned out to be worthwhile solely because she has found avenues for spreading the good word about the true freedom to be found in the realm of “imagination”: “Teaching literature everywhere, in the campos, classrooms, barracks, factorias -- literature for all. (*Liberature*, Nora likes to call it.)” (349).

As for hope for achieving a better world sometime in the future, Camila just repeats “what she must have said to herself time after time, when her dreams came tumbling down . . . Start over, start over, start over,” and assures Rodolfo that the struggle for social justice requires trial and error as well as ongoing effort: “We have to keep trying to create a patria . . . especially when the experiment fails” (342). When her niece Belkys comments that she doesn’t think “Castro is the answer,” Camila quickly replies, “It was wrong to think there was an answer in the first place, dear. There are no answers” (350). Yet at the same time Alvarez seems to be suggesting in all of this that somehow “imagination” -- whatever that vague term might actually mean -- does indeed provide a kind of answer, as if it contains the key to resolving all human problems, especially as they relate to matters of social justice.

Derek Wolcott seems to appeal to a similar principle when he claims that “In the Caribbean history is irrelevant . . . because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.”<sup>88</sup> Stuart Hall echoes the same notion when he insists that “Culture is production . . . It is . . . not a question of what our traditions make of us so much as what we make of our traditions. Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, but of becoming.”<sup>89</sup> Simon Gikandi, likewise, believes that imagination holds the key to solving the world’s problems, asserting, confidently, that “making culture the primary term in the relationship between ‘life’ and

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<sup>88</sup> Wolcott, Derek. “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Guarav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005, p. 259.

<sup>89</sup> Hall, Stuart. “Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad.” *Ibid.* p. 557.

its 'images' . . . is how postcolonial theories of globalization valorize the image and the imaginary."<sup>90</sup> Gikandi turns to Arjun Appadurai to support this contention; according to Appadurai: "imagination has become . . . a form of work . . . a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. The unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche . . . to the terror and coercion of states . . . The imagination . . . is the key component of the new global order."<sup>91</sup> While such claims certainly inspire optimism, and hope for a brighter human future, it does not seem either realistic or responsible for proponents of a vague imaginary to discount the lingering trauma of the imperial past, the savage inequities of the neoliberal present, or to blithely assume that reliance on "imagination" alone will provide adequate counterbalance to the overwhelming weight of concrete material fact. It would be unthinkable to complacently recommend "the play of pastiche," for example, to torture victims in the basements of Honduran police stations, or to frantic mothers searching for crushed children under the rubble and ruin of collapsed garment factories in Bangladesh.

In the postscript to *In the Time of Butterflies*, Alvarez states that the Trujillo dictatorship is "an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that can only be understood, only be redeemed by the imagination." She freely admits that she did not have access to "enough information" about the Mirabal sisters "to adequately record them," and so she "began to invent them" (324, 323). The process of invention involved, however, seems arbitrary in certain respects, for Alvarez's depiction of the Mirabal sisters raises serious issues regarding plausibility. Steve Critini notes that there is

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<sup>90</sup> Gikandi, Simon. "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality." Ibid. p. 617.

<sup>91</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1996.

insufficient historical documentation to provide a clear picture of what actually happened at the Columbus celebration party, and points out that Alvarez's portrayal of Minerva slapping Trujillo in front of the assembled guests "had a long run in the realm of legend but seems to bear no factual basis" (56).<sup>92</sup> It is highly unlikely that the dictator would ever have allowed such a profound and public humiliation to pass without immediate and violent retaliation, similar to what occurs in Alvarez's fabricated story about Sonia pointing an arrow at Trujillo during the play that she and Minerva act out at school earlier in the novel. On that occasion, Ramfis intervenes at once to defend his father, angrily forcing Sonia to remove Minerva's prop fetters with her teeth. After Minerva slaps Trujillo, however, there is no response whatsoever, except eventual repetition of Trujillo's request that Minerva agree to have sex with him. Her father is imprisoned, but subsequently released; he is then granted an audience along with his wife and daughter in the dictator's office, where Minerva challenges Trujillo to throw the loaded dice sitting on his desk: if she wins, she gets to go to law school; if he wins, she will submit to his lust. The result is a draw; yet throughout this interchange, Minerva appears to be the one in control of the situation. When she is questioned at National Police Headquarters by the general in charge, in the presence of the insidious security chief "Magic Eye," about her association with Virigilio, a hunted subversive, a simple denial on Minerva's part suffices to resolve the matter and secure her release: " 'That's what I like to hear'. The general turns to Magic Eye . . . dismissing him" (110).

Later in the novel, after she and her sisters are imprisoned for subversive activity, Minerva supposedly laughs when she returns from an interrogation session with Ramfis -

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<sup>92</sup> Critini, Steve. "Collecting Butterflies: Julia Alvarez's Revision of North American Collective Memory." *Modern Language Studies* 36.2 (2007): 42-63.

- who, as both Junot Diaz and Mario Vargas Llosa make clear, was notorious for his sadistic cruelty. She and Sina “always stand up to these guys,” Maria Teresa cheerfully reports. Mate herself is interrogated only twice: “Both times, I was asked gruff questions . . . and then they’d threaten me with things they would do to me . . . The second time, they didn’t even threaten me that much.” There is no mention of torture, or rape; Maria Teresa exercises daily despite the extremely confined space in the tightly packed cell -- twenty-four women packed together into “a room 25 by 20 of my size 6 feet” (228). The prisoners stage a collective protest in the form of what the guards supposedly consider an alarmingly dangerous “Crucifix Plot.” The single latrine bucket apparently gives off no offensive smell, since the prisoners are escorted outside by amenable guards at night to take care of their bodily functions; Tiny, the “fresh” prison guard, is especially eager to help out with this task because he “gets his chance to ‘frisk’ us in the dark” (245). A friendly guard even smuggles in amenities on a regular basis.

Minerva conducts consciousness raising classes: “I guess Fidel did this when he was in prison . . . and so we have to do it too” (233), for “revolution has become something like a habit for Minerva,” Mate observes, in a comment reminiscent of Camila’s remarks about dogmatic companeras in berets and combat boots (243). The various prisoners in the packed cell quickly begin interrelating like one big happy family; Maria Teresa actually expresses regret upon being released when she realizes she will have to leave the others behind: “this has become my home, these girls are like my sisters. I can’t imagine the lonely privacy of living without them” (253). The sole torture incident mentioned, the event that causes Maria Teresa to miscarry, is minimized; she is not fully disrobed, suffers no sexual molestation, and receives only a single electric

shock. Maria Teresa painstakingly blacks out names in her clandestine report to the OAS investigating team, even though the only person she is supposedly protecting is obviously her husband Leandro, the one other prisoner present in the room at the time. All of this flies in the face of what has been recounted in numerous testimonies by victims of imprisonment in Latin American dictatorships.<sup>93</sup> As Critini aptly observes, Alvarez's decision to have Maria Theresa relate the prison episode significantly influences the tone of the narrative: "A scene whose cruelty and brutality would surely illustrate the human pain and emotions endured by the women . . . is essentially romanticized and glossed over" (57).

It might be argued in Alvarez's defense here that her facile depictions of prison conditions should be excused or overlooked because her purpose as a writer is to produce romantic rather than realistic literature, yet the fact that she presumes to address these matters at all, along with larger issues concerning historical background and social justice, and with such complacency and self-assurance, surely calls for contextualizing commentary and analysis. Edward Said's observations concerning Jane Austen's novels come immediately to mind; insofar as Alvarez offers readers a particular, proposed world view, as Said notes, "we should . . . proceed to regard [this perspective] as not neutral . . .

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<sup>93</sup> For more on this topic, see: Alfred McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. (New York: Owl Books, 2006); Jennifer Harbury, *Truth, Torture, and the American Way* (Boston: Beacon, 2005); Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1981); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2011); Greg Grandin and Thomas Miller Klubock, eds. *Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory* (Durham: Duke U P, 2007); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan, 2007).



but as politically charged, beseeching the attention and elucidation its considerable proportions require” (93).<sup>94</sup>

Maria Christina Rodriguez asserts that in “these postmodern times . . . history is no longer factual documentation; instead, it is composed of events that are nurtured by everyone and everything. In Spanish, the word *historia* makes no distinction between history and story, between real and imagined, between facts and events. . . . history and story are individualized” (55).<sup>95</sup> While there is certainly value to be gained by expanding the framework of historical understanding, as Rodriguez suggests, it also seems important to consider the suitable scope and appropriate boundaries of imaginative reconstruction. History, obviously, cannot just be whatever individuals prefer it to be and therefore decide to invent; no responsible person gives any credit to deniers of the European Holocaust, for example (although numerous other examples of deliberate acts of genocide continue to be systematically silenced). Questions of accuracy and plausibility need to be addressed if a fictional version of past events is going to resonate meaningfully, and remain true to what is already known from collaborative study and collective experience. In that regard, much of Maria Theresa’s account of the Mirabal sisters’ time in prison simply does not seem probable. The same issue arises with Alvarez’s story of the hostage episode in *Saving the World*; it is difficult to believe that Alma could bypass the soldiers surrounding the clinic so easily, or that the guerrilla leader doesn’t know what a cell phone is, and thinks that it might be a grenade, or that none of the guerillas knows how to tell time on a clock with hands. It also seems absurd that the guerillas would

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<sup>94</sup> Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

<sup>95</sup> Rodriguez, Maria Cristina. “Political Authority Figures as Distant Memories of a Forgotten Past: Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salome* and Cristina Garcia’s *The Aguero Sisters*.” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 6.2 (2009): 55-63.

demand visas to the United States so that they can find jobs there, as if visas would protect them from retribution and prosecution. Much of what occurs in this episode comes across as so naïve as to be downright comical. The caricature of the young guerrillas, moreover, is reminiscent of the author's sarcastic skepticism regarding revolutionary activism in Camila's comments about Castro's Cuba.

Alvarez's version of the Mirabal sisters also clearly resonates with her preferred geopolitical perspective. Maria Teresa personifies a type of well-intentioned pragmatism that supposedly constitutes a more sensible and realistic approach to political affairs than Minerva's doctrinal rigidity and intellectual naiveté: "If we made up the perfect country Minerva keeps planning, I would fit in perfectly. The only problem for me would be if self-serving ones were allowed in. Then I believe I'd turn into one of them in self-defense" (245-56). Maria Teresa's formulation, however childishly articulated, expresses the common sense notion that there have always been and are likely to always be "self-serving ones" among any human population; she thus supposedly debunks Minerva's lofty theoretical claims that seem to imply the contrary as hopelessly naïve and unrealistic. Maria Teresa expresses a generously liberal sympathy and tolerance for her captors that Minerva dogmatically refuses to share: "they haven't done anything, I protest. They're victims too," to which Minerva retorts, "this isn't personal, Mate . . . This is principle." In response, fair-minded Maria Teresa laments, in a manner with which the reader is obviously invited to identify: "I never was good at understanding that difference so crucial to my sister. Everything's personal to me that's principle to her, it seems" (250). There is an unmistakable suggestion implicit in this passage that Minerva's "principles" are much too abstract and inflexible for complex human affairs, and would

inevitably transform into cruel, unjust, arbitrary authoritarianism; Minerva's political convictions seem to be the intellectual equivalent of beret and combat boots, in effect.

As is the case with Alvarez's implicit critique of Castro's Cuba in her version of Camila Urena, *In the Time of Butterflies* disparages any socialist approach to achieving social justice as intrinsically dogmatic and inherently authoritarian, as well as simple minded and ingenuous, even when adopted with the best of intentions. Early in the novel, Dede recalls asking Virigilio how he plans to accomplish his political goals, and being subjected to "a long lecture about the rights of the *campesinos*, the nationalization of sugar, and the driving away of the Yanqui imperialists. She had wanted something practical." He defends his position as "common sense," but she thinks to herself, "Common sense? Sitting around dreaming while the secret police hunted you down?" (77). When she hears Castro speaking over the radio, Dede dismisses his voice as "very taken with itself;" she is likewise unimpressed with Comrade Virigilio's "high-flown" speeches. When she sees Manolo's last message to his daughter on the day of his death, she becomes enraged: "I was furious . . . What did he mean *a great adventure? A disgrace* was more like it" (311).

It is easy enough for Alvarez to characterize Castro's Cuba as a "failed" experiment, and to disparage the unsuccessful efforts at social and political reform by Dominican activists, yet this critique suggests her implicit endorsement of a neoliberal paradigm as the only possible form of governance, a convenient perspective for one who clearly inhabits a privileged position within it. Ongoing attempts at creating workable socialist alternatives are continuing and proliferating throughout Latin America, all aimed at promoting social justice and alleviating extreme inequity and poverty, with varying

degrees of success. Such experiments might be appraised more fairly and accurately if they were allowed to function without interference by neo-imperial power systems, especially those concentrated in the United States.

For Alvarez, it would appear, solutions to social and political problems must be reduced to matters of individual benevolence and well-meaning, liberal-minded intent. Social reform requires searching out reprehensible villains, rather than engaging in institutional analysis. Just as Maria Teresa advises and consoles herself in her journal, “maybe you are going to make it through this hell with some dignity, some courage, and most important . . . with some love still in your heart for the men who have done this to you” (241), Patria prays for Captain Pena, and then witnesses “a funny thing . . . The devil I was so used to seeing disappeared, and for a moment . . . I saw an overgrown fat boy, ashamed of himself for kicking the cat and pulling the wings off butterflies” (217). Her mother refuses to have anything to do with Pena, but Patria decides otherwise: “I knew it was more complicated than that. He was both, angel and devil, like the rest of us” (219). The inescapable inference is that all the horror of the dictatorship stems from the uniquely irremediable evil of a single person. When she sees Trujillo the day the prisoners are released, Patria recalls: “I was sure I’d feel a certain kinship with the stocky, overdressed man before me. But it was just the opposite. The more I tried to concentrate on the good side of him, the more I saw a vain, greedy, unredeemed creature. Maybe the evil one had become flesh” (224). Tio Pepe also describes Trujillo as “this devil in human form” (281).

The suggestion is clear that it is Trujillo the individual who is the source of all of the injustices of the regime, rather than the institutional structures that created and sustain

him; once he is erased from the scene, healing can begin. Patria articulates this perspective when she conveys: “I wanted to believe in my fellow Dominicans again. Once the goat was a bad memory in our past, that would be the real revolution we would have to fight: forgiving each other for what we had allowed to come to pass” (222). After the murder of her sisters, Dede seeks a similar sense of reconciliation and resolution, “so that it could be human, so that we could begin to forgive it” (309). The same idea of release from pervasive evil that emanates from a single individual, whose demise automatically promises a brighter future, underlies Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat*, as well as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Autumn of the Patriarch*.

Depicting Trujillo as an aberrant anomaly, however, does not seem accurate in the context of the historical record. The role of the United States in this regard is of particular relevance and importance. This is not to say that the United States is the only world power that exercises a controlling influence in the region; yet the U.S., both because of its geographical proximity and preeminence as hemispheric hegemon, undoubtedly produces the most powerful impact. Crystal Parikh maintains that “the United States found that it could not overtly act against Trujillo’s increasingly authoritarian government after his election in 1930.”<sup>96</sup> Parikh insists that Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy prevented the U.S. from intervening in the affairs of the Dominican Republic, and that even though Trujillo represented a “public relations” problem for Washington, “the United States “begrudgingly extended international respect” to the regime, “begrudging because of the vicious character of the Trujillo government, but respectful of the Dominican people’s . . . sovereignty” (5-6).

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<sup>96</sup> Parikh, Crystal. “Regular Revolutions: Feminist Travels in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of Butterflies*.” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3.1 (2011).

Close examination of the historical background, however, suggests a decidedly different interpretation. As Eric Paul Roorda extensively documents, Trujillo had been trained and groomed by the U.S. Marines during their occupation of the island; in just a short time, the Marines promoted him to the rank of general in the National Guard that the U.S. had created to take the place of its own troops and ensure ongoing enforcement of a system of public order that served Washington's political and economic interests. After Trujillo's obviously staged election in 1930, he continued receiving strong support from military officials in Washington, support that continued throughout his rule. Roorda also makes it clear that Roosevelt's official nonintervention policy was more diplomatic posturing than political reality; the U.S. had already enforced its arbitrary will in the Caribbean under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, utilizing extreme violence while setting up authoritarian regimes that would ensure hemispheric dominance and continuing profits for U.S. businesses. It is not by mere accident that Trujillo's brutal reign coincided with the tyrannies of Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, Anastasio Somoza and his son Luis Samozá Debayle in Nicaragua, Jorge Ubico and Castillo Armas in Guatemala, Hernández Martínez in Salvador, Carlos Andino in Honduras, Juan Vicente Gómez and Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, Rojas Pinilla in Colombia, and François Duvalier in Haiti.

Against this background, Parikh's claim that the United States found itself helpless to intervene "because of the tremendous hostility that Dominicans felt toward the earlier Marine occupation" (5) is simply not tenable. Dominicans had waged intensive guerilla warfare against the occupation for eight years, yet this did not deter the invaders, who enjoyed overwhelming military superiority, and could easily take over the same

territory again. In the process of recounting her story about the butterflies, Dede remembers hearing her mother express outrage over the attitude and behavior of U.S. soldiers during the occupation: “Of course, I sympathized with our patriots. But what could we do against the Yanquis? They killed anyone who stood in their way. They burned our house down and called it a mistake. They weren’t in their own country so they didn’t have to answer to anyone” (57). Apart from brief, incidental mention, however, the U.S. occupation merits no further attention in Alvarez’s narrative about Trujillo.

Salome’s daughter Camila becomes attracted to a young Marine she meets in Washington; she expresses a certain degree of reservation about him because of what his counterparts are simultaneously doing in her homeland: “I am glad he wears civilian clothes when we go out. I could not bear sitting across from someone dressed in the uniform of our occupying force” (194). But her chief objective in the relationship is to have Scott Andrews arrange an interview with the U.S. president so that her father can be reinstated as president of the Dominican Republic; she does not seem overly concerned about the atrocities the Marines are routinely committing there. Personal as well as class interests take precedence. It is only when Andrews reveals himself to be unenthusiastic about making the necessary arrangements for a meeting at the White House, just when Camila is “falling in love, when it hurts to lose him,” that she discovers a reason to reject him, which she does with a flourish reminiscent of Minerva: “because she cannot hold in the fury any longer, she brings her hand down hard on the major’s pale face” (210-11).

The historical context makes it clear that Trujillo was carefully trained during the U.S. occupation to do what he did, which was establish and maintain tight control over Dominican public affairs; if his methods and style were sometimes unwelcome or

embarrassing, the end result justified the means in the eyes of his overseers in Washington. Roorda comments that, in the Caribbean vicinity generally:

a generation of consolidated authoritarian regimes developed in the wake of U.S. intervention and the Great Depression. . . . The Good Neighbor policy . . . changed the tactics but not the objectives of U.S. foreign policy in the American republics, substituting the carrot for the stick in eliciting cooperation. Stable military leaders, though not preferred, were assumed to prepare the ground for cultivating U.S. commercial and strategic interests in their own bailiwicks. Good Neighbor programs, which included regional consultations, loans, and military assistance, tended to strengthen the regimes. (127-28)<sup>97</sup>

U.S. policy in the region, before and after FDR, remained quite consistent, and continues basically unchanged up to the present day. If there is any doubt regarding this, one has only to take an honest look at what transpired in the Dominican Republic under Balaguer after Trujillo's demise, as well as what occurred in Central and South America throughout the 1970s and 1980s, including the invasion of Grenada in 1983, the invasion of Panama in 1989, along with the attempted coup in Venezuela in 2002, and the forced displacement of the democratically elected president of Honduras in 2009.

Steve Critini remarks that in the U.S., the killing of the Mirabal sisters "incited more national anger than Trujillo's other crimes. . . . [this incident] marked the beginning of the end for Trujillo" (43); this finding is significant, for it highlights the crucial fact that Trujillo's massacre of 18,000 Haitians in 1937 elicited no so such outrage. Roorda

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<sup>97</sup> Roorda, Eric Paul. *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945*. Durham: Duke U P, 1998.



provides extensive documentation of what amounted to essential indifference over this act of genocide against Haitians on the part of the Roosevelt administration, for which there were obviously higher priorities (126-48); as Roorda aptly summarizes and concludes: “reliance on dictators to attain the traditional U.S. goals of stability and cooperation meant having to ignore those instances when the strongmen themselves incited unrest and conflict. Their inclination to pursue agendas disruptive of regional harmony . . . tested the Good Neighbor policy” (146-47). Since Trujillo was perceived as furthering U.S. interests in the region, he successfully passed all such “tests.”

Critini also fails to mention that the murder of the Mirabal sisters came at a time of increasing strain in U.S.-Dominican relations, which may help explain why these deaths aroused such protest in the United States, while Trujillo’s earlier, much more egregious crimes had not. In the 1950s, Trujillo had begun placing pressure on certain U.S. business interests, especially the sugar and electric power industries, appropriating large sectors of production in these areas with state funds in order to aggrandize his personal wealth. Richard Lee Turits points out that, even though such moves caused increasing unease in Washington, other policy priorities nevertheless continued to prevail:

U.S. embassy officials perceived Trujillo’s actions as an . . . ominous shift . . . toward economic nationalism. [Yet] the U.S. government did not alter its policies . . . even after the West Indies Sugar Corporation was forced out of the Dominican Republic [because] the Cold War overwhelmed all other considerations in U.S. foreign policy in the post-1947 period. . . .

[Trujillo had] made himself as useful as possible to the U.S. in its anti-communist campaign. (241) <sup>98</sup>

Trujillo's relations with Washington did begin to deteriorate, however, after the regime encountered serious economic crises in the late 1950s, due to budget problems caused by the lavish expenditures on the 1955 twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, along with radical spikes in domestic military spending, and the simultaneous fall in world sugar prices. The 1956 kidnapping and disappearance of Jesus Galindez had caused an uproar in the United States, and so did the regime's vicious repression of the Fourteenth of June Movement in 1959. Trujillo's failed assassination attempt in July of 1960 against Venezuela's President Betancourt, an important U.S. ally, finally terminated Washington's longstanding support for his brutal tyranny.

Trujillo's relations with the Catholic Church, which had been close ever since the early 1930s, also began to come under increasing strain during this period, primarily due to the Vatican's refusal to grant the title Benefactor of the Church that Trujillo coveted; a serious rupture occurred when Dominican bishops promulgated the pastoral letter that Patria extols in Alvarez's novel as a protest against the regime's harsh repression of the Fourteenth of June insurgents. Instead of compromising, Trujillo attacked the Church, alienating much of what had been stable support for his government among the peasantry. The bishops immediately backed down -- a fact that receives no mention by Patria in Alvarez's account; according to Turits:

Following the regime's attacks and harassments, the Church renounced the strong position it had adopted in the pastoral letters. It issued a

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<sup>98</sup> Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford: Stanford U P, 2003.

conciliatory letter to Trujillo on January 10, 1961, disavowing ‘misinterpretations’ and ‘inaccuracies’ inferred from its pastoral letters. It regretted the deterioration in Church-state relations and offered renewed cooperation with the government. (256)

The single exception among Church hierarchy was Bishop Thomas Reilly, from Boston, who may well have taken his unique stand in conjunction with the increased antagonism toward Trujillo emanating from Washington. The United States needed allies in its escalating campaign to discredit, undermine, and destabilize Castro’s new government in Cuba; President Betancourt, among others in the region, was insisting on withdrawal of traditional U.S. support for Trujillo as a precondition for his cooperation (Turits 259). Bishop Reilly’s role figures prominently in Vargas Llosa’s *Feast of the Goat*, which valorizes both the Church and Balaguer. Alvarez also extols the role of the Church. Her brief allusion to Balaguer in *Butterflies* is only slightly more nuanced; Dede refuses to associate with him, primarily, it seems, because he “was the puppet president the day the girls were killed” (317).

Alvarez’s account correctly portrays the United States as supportive, by the late 1950s, of what has come to be referred to in recent decades as “regime change” (although she does not allude to the U.S.’s sustained support for Trujillo before then), on the condition that the new Dominican government did not in any way resemble Castro’s; Turits notes that “U.S. officials . . . [made it] clear that they would support . . . a ‘moderate’ force overthrowing the dictator” (259). The crucial issue here is the continuing, pivotal role played by the United States throughout the twentieth century in Dominican affairs, beginning with Wilson’s 1916 occupation, and persisting right

through Lyndon Johnson's 1965 invasion, along with its aftermath in the ensuing decades. Washington's influence has been crucial in determining outcomes on the island; yet the U.S. role is conveniently disregarded and totally ignored by Alvarez, and by virtually all the critics. These issues are of prime importance for Junot Diaz, and central to his fiction. The fact that they are ignored by Alvarez raises serious questions about the accuracy as well a relevance of her depictions, and the validity of her conclusions.

Dede refers, in a tone of cynical resignation, to "our spell of revolutions," presumably occurring after Trujillo's assassination: "When we had them regularly, as if to prove we could kill each other even without a dictator telling us to" (303-04). The same cynicism is reflected in the reference to "who-knows-which revolution" in the first few pages of "Antojos," the opening chapter of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (5). For Dede, the dream of a brighter Dominican future has faded with the passing of her three martyred sisters; when he comes to visit Dede, Juan Bosch is reduced to a shadow of these irreplaceable heroic figures:

Every time he made . . . promises, he'd look at me as if he needed me to approve what he was doing. Or really, not me, but my sisters whose pictures hung on the wall behind me. Those photos had become icons, emblazoned on posters. *Bring back the butterflies!* (310)

Even though she vaguely refers to outside interference by the United States, Dede reduces the ongoing violence and political oppression in her homeland to an unavoidable inevitability:

the coup, the president thrown out before the year was over, the rebels up in the mountains, the landing of the marines. . . . I overheard one of the

talk shows on the radio . . . somebody analyzing the situation. He said something that made me sit up and listen. 'Dictatorships,' he was saying, 'are pantheistic. The dictator manages to plant a little piece of himself in every one of us.' . . . So this is what is happening to us. (310-11)

Persisting injustice is attributable to inescapable corruption within individual Dominicans; the U.S., supposedly, has little or nothing to do with it.

Dede explains that she needs a "story to understand what had happened to us" (313); this idea of a "story" for explaining one's personal experience as well as what is happening in the world is a central trope in Alvarez's work. In "The stalker" chapter near the end of her novel *Yo!*, the crazed young man paraphrases Yolanda's basic premise as a writer, which may be read as paralleling Alvarez's, as well. The stalker reminds Yolanda, "I heard you talking . . . about how after food and clothing and shelter stories is how we take care of each other" (290); Yolanda's father explains, "My grandchildren and great grandchildren will not know the way back unless they have a story" (309). The inference is clear that this must be true for all human beings. Indeed, this is what literary narrative promises to offer in its unique way -- what Conrad refers to as "the glimpse of truth" that people require to make sense of their experience, and find meaning in their lives. Yet much depends, as in Conrad's case, on the breadth of vision of the writer, and the accuracy of his or her grasp of the facts on which any literary narrative is inevitably based -- on what is included, as well as what is left out.

Dede's story infers a sense of fatalism about socio-economic and political affairs due to some unexplained flaw in human nature -- a basic defect which creates a hidden dictator in every person. Yet Dede's version of events in the Dominican Republic -- and

Alvarez's -- minimizes the overwhelming and determining role of U.S. policy; outcomes for Dominicans throughout the decades after Trujillo's death might have turned out quite differently if the U.S. had not directly, violently intervened to displace the republic's democratically elected chief executive in 1963. In "The suitor" chapter in *Yo!*, one of Yolanda's wealthy uncles is running for president; when her boyfriend asks about this, Yolanda defends the political system after Trujillo as being the best that could be expected under the circumstances: "She has told him it is a democracy down there, but she claims the word doesn't mean the same thing as here. She has told him her uncle is a good guy, but that he is surrounded by advisors and military thugs she doesn't trust. 'You get the picture,' she says" (190). That this uncle's conception of democracy, as well as Garcia family privilege, depends on collaboration with U.S. corporate interests deserves no consideration.

According to Dede's and Yolanda's interpretation of island politics, Dominicans seem to be doomed to disappointment as far as realizing any dreams of social justice are concerned; Dede and Yolanda indicate little or no understanding of what stands in the way of citizens' progressive aspirations, or why. When Viriglio, now a prominent attorney with a highly successful law practice in the capitol - and a young spouse to serve as "nurse wife for his old age" (317) -- observes that " 'The nightmare is over. Look at what the girls have done,' " Dede reflects:

He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now

the playground of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields. The cemetery is beginning to flower. (318)

And then Dede asks the perplexing question, “Was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies?” For which she offers no clear answer, except the ambiguous inference that yes, maybe this is the best that can be expected, maybe this is as good as it gets.

Yet this sense of resigned complacency might well prove somewhat unsatisfying for less fortunate Dominicans who happen to be forced, due to lack of more viable opportunities, to accept employment in one of the Free Zones that Dede mentions, where local workers typically labor for slave wages under brutally harsh conditions, enabling those lucky few who benefit from the hegemonic system, North as well as South, to amass great wealth, while the vast majority languish in increasing despair. Dede seems more than resigned to this state of affairs. Minou owns a fashionable store in the capitol, where she sells new lines of “play clothes” she designs, in-between teaching poetry and politics at the university, while Jacqueline remodels her penthouse, and Manolito keeps busy with his agricultural projects -- each simply doing whatever seems natural: “all of them smart young men and women making good money. They aren’t like us, I think. They knew almost from the start they had to take on the world” (304). Apparently, their parents were foolish dreamers to think they could change it, or even to imagine it might need changing. Pondering her question about the goals of the butterflies, and reflecting on the society around her, Dede considers the disposition of Minerva’s daughter, Minou, and decides that she has done a satisfactory job of raising her, given the reality of the world she has to deal with: “But all this is a sign of my success, isn’t it? She’s not haunted and full of hate. She claims it, this beautiful country with its beautiful mountains

and splendid beaches -- all the copy we read in the tourist brochures” (319), which attract wealthy foreign vacationers from abroad, who contribute so significantly to, and form such a crucial component of, the modern Dominican economy. For her part, Dede will accept the top employee award from her insurance company and travel on a paid vacation to Canada to marvel at fall foliage for the first time.

Alvarez’s confident advocacy of imagination for solving all personal as well as social problems resonates throughout her novels. Minou, Jacqueline, and Manolito’s determination to face reality, to be all they can be, and to “take on the world” also becomes part of Alma’s cautionary story for the young guerilla who guards her during the hostage episode at the close of *Saving the World*: “‘If I were you, I’d surrender now . . . you might get a better deal.’ She wishes he could read. She’d give him a copy of the autobiography of Malcolm X . . . She brings up Abraham Lincoln.” Alma is careful not to delude her troubled captor: “The point is not to trick the boy but to give him some narrative of hope, a piece of string he can take hold of to make his way out of this hellhole labyrinth.” She mentions charitable organizations that might provide money for his education, tells him that even she and her husband might contribute: “‘You can become a lawyer, a doctor’ . . . she can’t stop herself from imagining a way out for him because this is the way to begin, the story that is not a story, that might just happen if she gets him believing it can really happen to him” (291-292).

If the reader detects a certain melancholy in Dede’s resignation in the final chapter of *Butterflies*, that’s because sentimental nostalgia naturally arises in a postmodern world wise enough to awaken from anti-colonial delusions and violent revolutionary activism gone awry. According to Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado



Saez, anti-colonial movements featured inspirational leaders such as Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Amiri Baraka, and Malcom X; the postcolonial writer inevitably mourns the loss of authority associated with the passing of such intrepid, idealistic figures. Dalleo and Saez perceive Alvarez as a contemporary spokesperson with more modest goals; she is “a kind of public intellectual, positioning writing as a process intimately connected with history and social struggles” (133). Unlike anti-colonial thinkers who preceded her, however, Alvarez accepts “post-colonialism’s deconstruction of margin and center, namely that hegemony is never total” (137), and recognizes “the mutual implication of margin and center . . . as a site of domination and resistance” (134). Due to “the transnational connections between the United States and the postcolonial world” (134), Dalleo and Saez insist that Alvarez refuses “to reduce all cultural exchanges within the hemisphere to a totalizing cultural imperialism” (137). From this perspective, “the United States becomes a part of New World history, not only as its main protagonist but also as just another player with a history of corruption and turmoil not so different than its neighbors” (137).<sup>99</sup>

The idea of deconstructing a totalizing notion of hegemonic imperialism seems appealing in the abstract, as it infers necessary respect for the innumerable, extremely subtle complexities that are inevitably involved in international affairs, yet the concept of “transnationalism” itself becomes all too easily totalizing in its own right when applied too broadly, overlooking such crucial factors as basic power relations. There is a significant tension, bordering on outright contradiction, between the notions of the United

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<sup>99</sup> Dalleo, Raphael and Elena Machado Saez. “Writing in a Minor Key: Postcolonial and Post-Civil Rights Histories in the Novels of Julia Alvarez.” *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

States as a “main protagonist,” and at the same time “just another player” in New World history and intra-hemispheric affairs. Due to its overwhelming economic and military power, coupled with its expansionist ideology, embedded in fervent belief in Manifest Destiny, along with the defining policy of the Monroe Doctrine, the United States necessarily transcends the role and impact of “just another player” in the Americas, as the historical record clearly reveals. Dalleo and Saez cite Salome’s reference to “United States just beginning to fight for the independence of its black people” (25), and Camila’s observation that “in Washington, Senator McCarthy is launching a purge not unlike those of Batista’s secret police” (69) to support their case for transnationalist theory, but these examples only weaken the force of their argument. It is hardly convincing to claim that the Civil War was fought to free black people when one considers the tenure and impact of Jim Crowe, which persists into the present in the form of crowded inner-city ghettos and a racially skewed prison system. Nor is there a compelling case to be made that the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s were in any way equivalent to repression in Batista’s Cuba, since the same Washington-inspired anti-communist hysteria drove both, along with the continuing repression in the Dominican Republic under Balaguer, as well as U.S. sponsored genocide in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s. Naomi Klein’s 2006 study *The Shock Doctrine* masterfully elucidates the overwhelming influence of the U.S. economic policies that were imposed on governments throughout the region during the same period, with eager cooperation from local elites, who benefitted immensely from the so-called neoliberal “reforms.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine*. New York: Picador, 2007.

Crystal Parikh likewise advocates a “transnational feminist practice” that “allows us to reconceive of politics in a hemispheric frame” (1), citing Maria Josefina Saldano-Portillo’s thesis that “a hemispheric transnationalism can refuse to take at face value the claim that post-1945 reformist theories of liberal developmentalism and theories of social revolutionary movements comprised polar opposites” (1). Saldano-Portillo’s thesis is that “developmentalist and revolutionary speech acts are constitutive of each other” (4).<sup>101</sup> Parikh argues that anti-colonial revolutionary struggles failed because they were undermined from the start by the goal of material progress they espoused, conflating their praxis in the long run with that of the same capitalist hegemony they sought to replace: “development discourse assumes ‘progress’ according to the history and standard of Western nations, inculcating the desirability of technological mediation, commodity production, and consumer practices” (4). In effect, revolutionaries’ adoption of developmental objectives required accepting the First World framework of technological progress, commodity production, and consumerism. Yet this argument ignores the fundamental difference between capitalist emphasis on individual self-maximization, and socialist goals of promoting the collective good. The central issue is not development itself, but rather how fairly and equitably the material benefits of a given society are redistributed. In this sense, First World discourse about developmentalism and Third World struggles for social justice are indeed “polar opposites,” however unacceptable the notion of binaries might be in contemporary postmodernist-poststructuralist thought.

In fact, social revolutionary movements in the Western hemisphere cannot accurately be said to have “failed” at all, for they continue to evolve and develop into the

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<sup>101</sup> Saldano-Portillo, Maria Josefina. *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*. Durham: Duke U P, 2003, p.4.

present, with determined emphasis on nonviolent political change grounded in core principles of social democracy -- and with notable efficacy, producing significant results. Despite more than a half century of crippling blockade and ongoing terrorist attack by the United States, Cuba's revolution continues to thrive in ways that have defied all expectations. Castro may be castigated by the upper classes in the First World as a dictator, but he is hailed by many in the Third World as an ongoing source of heroic inspiration. In the twenty-first century, for the first time ever since the landing of Columbus, numerous Latin American countries today are finally enjoying a degree of autonomy and economic prosperity that significantly improves quality of life for average citizens, including perennially oppressed indigenous peoples. In contrast, as Crystal Parikh points out, Alvarez's approach regarding social justice focuses primarily, not on society as a whole, but on expanding freedoms and improving the lives of selected individuals, particularly upper and middle class women. Poor and lower class people generally do not appear frequently in Alvarez's fiction, beyond passing, condescending mention -- like the grateful grandmother at the end of "Antojos." When they do figure in her narratives, as in the "Stranger," "Caretakers," and "Landlady" episodes in *Yo!*, they end up merely the grateful recipients of Yolanda's admirable benevolence.

The opening chapter of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, "Antojos," closes with the incongruous billboard image of the Palmolive woman with her head thrown back and mouth open "as if she is calling someone over a great distance" (23), suspended above the grateful little boy who has helped Yolanda gather guavas and thus humbly earned several dollars in the process, now idly dreaming of what he will buy with his money, "what he most craves." This little boy is remarkably fortunate, for he now

suddenly has the opportunity to be included in the consumer culture, too. Standing next to him is his appreciative grandmother, who is waving goodbye to their generous benefactress from the city. The setting is rural; life is tranquil and serene, free of pressing poverty, resonant with the promise of future prosperity hovering in the air. Parikh argues that for the Garcia sisters, rebellion involves claiming equal space in the consumer culture of their adopted homeland, along with the right to control their sexuality as they see fit. The chapter “A Regular Revolution” appropriates tropes usually associated with revolutionary movements to articulate the sisters’ struggle to liberate Fifi from the oppressive norms of patriarchal oppression on their home island. The Mirabel sisters, likewise, lacking a cogent public discourse to guide their desire for comprehensive revolutionary change, resort to a “descent into the ordinary as a form of agency” (15), according to Parikh; the site of liberation must be kept restricted to the individual woman’s aspirations for freedom and self-realization in the context of her everyday life.

Parikh’s transnationalist argument fails to account for the extreme economic disparities produced by neoliberal programs, and also for the way revolutionary discourse continues to evolve, and is actively promoting genuine social justice in many parts of the hemisphere; as Saldano-Portillo pointedly observes: “indigenous movements are rewriting revolutionary projects in the Americas to include indigenous people as authorities over their own experience” (12). Parikh overlooks the fact that contemporary proponents of revolutionary change have begun questioning, with increasing urgency, the fundamental premises of developmentalism itself. Twenty-first century activists insist on radical cutbacks in consumption, pointing out that natural resource depletion, along with imminent environmental catastrophe, and the increasing danger of nuclear annihilation,

pose serious risks for the very survival of the human species, which requires radical restructuring of economic models and innovative modes of social organization, as well as enhanced international cooperation on a global scale. Junot Diaz addresses all of these critical issues in his fiction; Julia Alvarez complacently glosses over them. At the same time, she seems to set herself up as an authority figure, in her role as a fiction writer, relying on the revelatory authority of “imagination,” representing herself, through her alter ego Yolanda, as the guiding light for enlightened social progress. At the close of “The wedding guests” chapter in *Yo!*, the assembled gathering, along with the reader, is invited to contemplate “an angel in a silver tunic, sent to the poor shepherds to say, ‘Do not be afraid.’ . . . then the angel comes forward a few steps, and the word becomes flesh, Yolanda Garcia!” (240).

The notion of a mysterious spiritual authority somehow informing and supporting Yolanda’s messianic mission as a writer is reinforced further in the novel’s final chapter when her father compares the beating he inflicted on Yoyo in the bathroom to “Isaac pinned on the rock and his father Abraham lifting the butcher knife” (309). Jessica Wells Cantiello maintains that “the story of Abraham and Isaac . . . serves as the origin of Yolanda’s artistic identity” -- not to mention the explicit comparison of the author’s sudden emergence at the wedding to the redemptive birth of Jesus Christ -- and asserts that “Papi gives Yo ownership over his stories and those of other Dominicans. The invocation to ‘tell’ gives her the duty to pass them on as she sees fit” (101).<sup>102</sup>

Steve Critini maintains that throughout *In the Time of Butterflies*:

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<sup>102</sup> Cantiello, Jessica Wells. “‘That Story about the Gun’: Pseudo-Memory in Julia Alvarez’s Autobiographical Novels.” *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 36.1 (2011): 83-108.

Alvarez is writing for a North American English-speaking audience, whose collective memory she is attempting to reshape . . . she is subtly challenging and reconfiguring a too-often jingoistic North American collective memory and identity. Her approach is not leveled via a blatantly metafictional, highly critical, politically charged -- essentially loudmouthed -- approach that might easily be dismissed by detractors. Rather, she is subtly embedding a disruptive memory into North American collective memory with the hope of ultimately altering that memory's shape and constitution. (54)

There can be no doubt that Alvarez's account of the Mirabal sisters alerts readers in the United States, where citizens tend to be somewhat ignorant of issues and events outside the First World, to the struggles and suffering of Dominicans under Trujillo, but her narrative seems both insufficient and incomplete, and as such proves quite misleading. Alvarez's novel focuses exclusively on Trujillo as the source of all the evil that transpired, and, furthermore, makes it appear that this evil is now a thing of the past. The ongoing oppression under Balaguer is ignored, along with the crucial role the United States has played before, during, and ever since Trujillo's time in power. The degrading poverty suffered by the majority of Dominicans under the ongoing U.S.-imposed neoliberal regime receives no attention whatsoever; instead, readers are left to ponder Dede's resigned complacency, that suggests that this is about as good as it gets, at least for the time being, while humanity waits for further, gradual, incremental improvements inspired and generated by individual genius and patronizing benevolence, such as Yolanda's. Jennifer Bess contends that "Alvarez honors both Fanon and Glissant by

reinventing the history of her homeland without sacrificing the truth of the losses its denizens have suffered collectively” (18), yet it seems clear that essential aspects of Dominicans’ suffering in modern history have indeed been ignored, or “sacrificed” -- either from ignorance of the relevant facts, or because accounting for them is inconvenient -- in Alvarez’s retelling of their story “as she see fits.”

Emily Robbins praises *In the Time of Butterflies* as an example of “the testimonial function of a novel,” the ability of “testimonios to give voice to the oppressed . . . [to] allow, if even for a brief moment, the subaltern to speak. These texts point to repression, violence, and torture, and in testifying to these injustices, they are a call to action.” Yet it is precisely the voice of the subaltern, the voices of the underprivileged classes in the Dominican Republic, that seems to be missing in Alvarez’s narrative. Robbins insists that “something is asked of us by Alvarez’s text. . . . her postscript connects the Mirabals and the present-day International Day Against Violence Towards Women” (138-39).<sup>103</sup> Although advocacy for women’s rights is praiseworthy, of course, it seems there ought to be broader issues at stake, as well, such as concern for the miserable condition of the countless child street beggars that Oscar Wao encounters on the streets of Santo Domingo.

Isabel Zakrzewski Brown observes that there is an exaggeration involved in the characterization of the Mirabal sisters that belies Alvarez’s purported goal of demythologizing and humanizing these women: “Alvarez . . . fashions stereotypes, rather than real people. These include: the pious one, Patria; the pragmatic one, Dede; the

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<sup>103</sup> Robbins, Emily. “Uncovering the Silent Crypts: Memory, Trauma and Testimony in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies*. *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic Studies of the University of Auckland* 20 (2009): 127-140.



rebellious one, Minerva; and the innocent one, Mate. The four come together to form a perfect whole: the now legendary Mirabal sisters” (110).<sup>104</sup> Steve Critini agrees, yet argues that this literary strategy is deliberate on Alvarez’s part, for she is “influenced by . . . North American values and constructed identities” (54), including “Honest Abe, Nixon the crook, Benedict Arnold the turncoat, racist Strom Thurmond, sultry Marilyn Monroe” (59), and so on. This seems like curious reasoning on Critini’s part; if the purpose for writing the novel is to enlighten North American readers regarding the struggle for social justice in the Dominican Republic, one could easily think of more relevant U.S. prototypes, for example, Thomas Paine, Frederick Douglas, Emma Goldman, or Eugene Debs. As Critini himself points out at the beginning of his article, accounts of past events that prove acceptable to collective memory tend to be self-justifying and self-serving: “Our notion of the present leads us to shape the past in ways that justify our present conception of ourselves. . . . those with the most power in the present, due to their need to legitimize their holding of that power, have the most control over collective memory of the past”( 45). Critini’s claim that Alvarez’s project is somehow subtly subversive of North Americans complacency regarding the role of U.S. policies in shaping the experience of Dominicans becomes suspect in the framework of his own argument.

Critini perceives Alvarez’s project as supportive of “the North American myth of the self-made woman: the rugged individualist striking out on her own, away from home and family, in order to be true to herself and make a positive contribution in the national landscape” (53). Yet this myth presupposes the capacity of the “self-made individual” to possess the necessary wisdom to dictate the optimal ways for organizing society and

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<sup>104</sup> Brown, Isabel Zakrzewski. “Historiographic Metafiction in *In the Time of Butterflies*.” *South Atlantic Review* 64.2 (1999): 98-112.

conducting human affairs. Alvarez seems to arrogate to herself the right to provide authoritative commentary on social issues, which might well reveal a sense of exaggerated self-importance. Human knowledge and insight expand and accumulate only through collaborative inquiry and collective discussion; no single individual possesses all the necessary answers. When Alvarez makes the sweeping claim that the Trujillo dictatorship can only be understood through the medium of imagination, she seems to assume that her personal imagination is fully adequate to the task. Yet her account leaves out crucial historical factors, while creating stereotypical portraits of actual persons, and in so doing tends to reinforce rather than subvert North Americans' complacency about their government's role in enabling grave injustices, in the past as well as the present.

If one intends to hold up a North American ideal in order to illuminate the evils of Trujillo's regime, it might be more apt and appropriate to turn to the grounding principles of the Declaration of Independence, with its unequivocal assertion that all human beings are created equal, and possess shared, innate rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One might also point to another model of a North American woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, and tell the story of how, following the global calamity of World War II, she brought together some of the leading moral authorities of her time to formulate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its guarantees of adequate food, shelter, and employment necessary for ensuring reasonable quality of life for every person on the planet. One might steer away from over emphasis on "rugged individualism" and speak instead about the crucial importance of mutual cooperation for achieving collective well-being, not to mention ongoing human survival. Such an approach would seem to be more

in line with Alvarez's professed goal, and preferred perception of her role as a public intellectual, especially as an author intent on "saving the world."

## Writing the Lightning: Language and the Bridge of Love

Even as Junot Diaz freely employs postmodern literary strategies, such as writing himself into the text and thereby radically blurring the distinction between author and narrator, he implicitly challenges the core tenet and grounding premise of poststructuralist theory, epitomized in Derrida's claim that all language statements are indeterminable because language is socially constructed and words are "infinitely iterable." Alex Thomson explains Derrida's concept of iterability this way: "the *ideality* of written and verbal signs . . . allows them to be repeated, used, and understood in new contexts, to mean things quite different from what was originally 'intended' by them." Thus, there is no "single, fixed, definite meaning which stands behind and apart from all its [a particular word's] uses; 'deconstruction' is one of a potentially infinite series of uses of the same word, in different contexts, to communicate different meanings."<sup>105</sup>

In "Signature Event Contest," Derrida argues that there can never be any clear communication of discernible meaning in spoken or written language because there is no direct, necessary correlation between the intent of the speaker or writer and the way his words are interpreted and understood by his listeners or readers. Since language, in Derrida's view, is entirely socially constructed, linguistic expressions are inevitably subject to varying personal interpretations. Derrida also insists that individual words each contain within themselves their own opposite denotations, and that therefore words "iterate" constantly, taking on various shades of meaning and nuance that are potentially infinite in scope. Furthermore, since writing persists over time in the text, written

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<sup>105</sup> Thomson, Alex. "Deconstruction." *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. New York: Oxford UP, 2006, p. 300.

statements exist independently of both author and reader, and thus automatically and continuously “deconstruct” their stated meanings, due to the slippery nature of language itself.

Moreover, according to poststructuralist theory, reality itself must be regarded as subjectively and semantically constructed; Alex Thomson puts it this way:

If writing is iterable, so is ‘reality’: if there is nothing beyond textuality, it is not merely because our understanding of the word becomes heavily mediated through cultural assumptions . . . but because in its very structure, an ‘event’ is like a word, a text. Events are ‘iterable’: they can be cited, discussed, and examined in new contexts. (305)

The idea that events are textual suggests that reality itself is constructed by language, a notion that approaches metaphysical subjectivism (as well as subjective idealism), as familiarly articulated in the popular expression “perception is reality.” This is tantamount to asserting that reality can only be what the individual person claims it to be, since language actually establishes, rather than merely represents the world around us.

Because iterable word meanings (as well as iterable events) become complicated and obscured by intention and interpretation, as well as altered by social and historical context, the import of semantic significance necessarily varies from person to person, which implies that linguistic expressions can ultimately be said to mean only what any given individual says they mean. If interpretation and understanding remain ultimately undecidable due to individual variance, then articulating any general consensus regarding events, as well as arriving at agreement on moral standards for evaluating them, becomes impossible, since human perceptions are inherently relative. All we can examine or

evaluate is the concrete, particular expression, text, situation, or occurrence; there is no possibility of formulating broadly encompassing narratives or postulating universal ethical principles that support basic human rights, since semantic meaning (and thus reality itself) varies from person to person, culture to culture, and context to context.

Of course, individual literary critics express their own various perspectives and personal points of view regarding texts, events, and ethics; poststructuralism represents a general tendency in contemporary thinking and analysis, not a rigidly organized doctrinal system. Yet the overall emphasis that poststructuralist theory places on the inevitable deconstruction of intended meanings, so that any given statement or text is seen as automatically and necessarily undermining itself, leads not only to an intellectual ethos of implicit moral and cultural relativism, but also to a pervasive skepticism regarding encompassing statements about reality -- a tendency that has become especially problematic with regard to poststructuralist claims about the constructed nature of history, and the supposed collapse of distinction between center and periphery.

The associated problems of deconstruction and moral relativism are of particular concern when it comes to interpreting and understanding Junot Diaz's fiction, because for all his respect for the play and plasticity of language, and reliance on postmodern literary strategies, Diaz boldly challenges readers to confront and account for the moral outrages of unprecedented genocide and brutal human bondage at the core of Western history, as well as the extreme economic inequality and worsening deprivation and misery that pervades the neoliberal present. Diaz also forces us to confront the grim prospect of possible species suicide that is being insidiously perpetrated by transnational corporate capitalism's cannibalistic avarice. Despite these pressing concerns and disturbing themes,

most of the critical discussion of Diaz's work to date -- due to the pervasive influence of poststructuralist theory -- remains focused on how his texts supposedly deconstruct and undermine their apparent meaning.

Poststructuralist theory has produced significant benefits for human understanding, proponents argue, in that deconstruction has provided a useful tool for challenging what Lyotard refers to as "grand narratives;" one would think this might be especially applicable to narratives promoted as justifications for European conquest, colonization, and imperial exploitation of the globe. Thus, as a result of the deconstruction of dominant First World discourse, we would no longer accept claims of white racial superiority, for example, nor automatically subscribe to devious notions such as the self-proclaimed, self-justifying "civilizing mission" of the colonial-imperial project. Imperial discourse would thus be subjected to compelling interrogation from multiple perspectives and widely varying voices.

Yet the poststructuralist proposition that there can be no general truth statements, or "grand narratives," challenges the legitimacy of counter narratives as well -- such as those proposed by Diaz -- and thus, ironically, undermines or "deconstructs" itself, since this sweeping prohibition asserts a universal truth claim even as it denies the validity of any and all universal truth claims. David Hirsch describes the difficulty with the poststructuralist position as

a plethora of contradictions: for example, there is no absolute truth, except the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth; consciousness . . . is historically determined, but . . . there is no subject; the subject . . . does not exist, but the deconstructionists . . . speak and act as if they were

individual subjects; [they] are opposed to all forms of authority . . . except that they claim authority for their own writings.<sup>106</sup>

According to Chris Snipp-Walmsley, the conflation of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory results in a world view wherein “a wholesale relativism . . . has infringed upon all areas of knowledge and interest, leading to a wholesale skepticism about truth, ethics, value, and responsibility.”<sup>107</sup> Poststructuralism “advocates the dissolution of the grand narratives and is, in itself, the grand narrative of the end of grand narratives. . . . it is the cultural logic of late capitalism; it is the loss of the real” (405-06). The human individual is stripped of all agency, for she is “culturally determined and created by the various discourses of power and language games that flow through and from her” (408). As a result, the “tragic becomes farcical, because the search for, and belief in, Truth has been discarded” (410). As the “logic of late capitalism,” poststructuralist theory, intentionally or not, thus serves as a convenient form of contemporary ideological justification for the ongoing, exacerbating exploitation engineered by the imperial project that dates back half a millennium.

Poststructuralist skepticism, according to Snipp-Walmsley, derives from Derrida’s insistence on the indeterminacy of all language statements:

Derrida argued . . . that no sign or system of signs is ever stable; meaning is always deferred, and any system or explanation is always undone by the elements it contains but needs to suppress. These aporias, or self-contradictory impasses, effectively deconstruct any authoritative claim or

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<sup>106</sup> Hirsch, David. *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz*. Hanover: U P of New England, 1991, p. 18-19.

<sup>107</sup> Snipp-Walmsley, Chris. “Postmodernism.” *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. New York: Oxford U P, 2006, p. 405.



explanation. Reality is not only constructed through language; it is . . . always already textual. There is no way of escaping the endless chain of reference. There is no outside vantage-point or transcendental position which would allow any effective or lasting guarantee. . . . Truth is always contingent. . . . Ethics, values, and truths are always relative. (411)<sup>108</sup>

Catherine Belsey attempts to defend deconstruction from the charge of moral relativism; Belsey contends that Derrida's key insight, supposedly based on Saussure's structuralism, is that "language is not ours to possess, but always pre-exists us and comes from the outside . . . ideas . . . are language's effect rather than its cause [therefore] there is no final answer to the question of what any particular example of language in action ultimately means." Nevertheless, Belsey assures us, "That does not imply . . . that it can mean whatever we like . . . a specific instance of signifying practice can mean whatever the shared and public possibilities of those signifiers in that order will permit."<sup>109</sup> In Belsey's view, we are not dealing with moral relativism -- although this is far from obvious -- so much as cultural relativism.

One cannot hope to arrive at the universal ethic that Kwame Anthony Appiah appeals for if it is impossible to talk about universals at all. Christopher Butler notes that for poststructuralists, all propositions consist of mutually contradictory binaries, which can be resolved because "they depend on one another for their definition." According to this assumption, "binaries can be undone or reversed, often to paradoxical effect, so that truth is 'really' a kind of fiction, reading is always a form of *misreading*, and, most

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<sup>108</sup> Presumably, the truths or axioms articulated in these propositions should likewise be considered contingent, since they are expressed in language statements.

<sup>109</sup> Belsey, Catherine. *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002, p.18.

fundamentally, understanding is always a form of *mis*understanding, because it is never direct, is always a form of partial interpretation.” The key assertion of poststructuralists, that language pre-exists and thus constructs the subject, thus necessarily leads to both epistemic and moral relativism, because “the world, its social systems, human identity even, are not *givens*, somehow guaranteed by a language which corresponds to reality, but are *constructed by us* in language, in ways that can never be justified by the claim that this is the way things ‘really’ are. We live, not inside reality, but inside our representations of it.” [Butler’s emphasis].<sup>110</sup>

This means, Catherine Belsey asserts, that there can be no discussion of universal principles with respect to social justice or human rights:

Deconstruction . . . pushes meaning toward undecidability, and in the process democratizes language. Binary oppositions do not hold, but can always be undone. The trace of otherness in the selfsame lays all oppositions open to deconstruction, leaving no pure or absolute concepts that can be taken as foundational. Meanings . . . human rights, for example, are not individual, personal, or subjective, since they emanate from language. . . . they are not given in nature or guaranteed by any existing authority.<sup>111</sup>

It is interesting that Belsey seems to feel a need to front-load her claims rhetorically (“pure,” “absolute”); further, her insistence that binaries “can *always* be undone” expresses a sweeping, totalizing assumption. It also seems ironic that anyone would

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<sup>110</sup> Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002, pp. 20-21.

<sup>111</sup> Belsey, p.87.

assert that deconstruction “democratizes language,” since the effect of the “undecidability” it imposes, along with its emphasis on cultural relativism, effectively disables democratic conversation about social justice and human rights. It turns out that, from a scientific perspective, it may well be that human rights actually are, in fact, “given in nature,” as suggested by John Mikhail and the current research on the Universal Moral Grammar.

With a sense of wry humor conveyed with gravity as well as playfulness, Junot Diaz poses an explicit challenge to poststructuralist moral relativism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Yuniors describes the police captain who orders Oscar’s murder as:

one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away. . . . Like my father, he supported the U.S. Invaders, and because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists, he was launched -- no, vaulted -- into the top ranks of the military police. Was very busy under Demon Balaguer. Shooting at sindicatos from the backseat of cars. Burning down organizers’ homes. Smashing in people’s faces with crowbars. (294-295)

The irony and sarcasm of the style does not relieve the moral revulsion that instinctively arises at the revelation of how this sadist “played mazel-tov on a fifteen-year-old boy’s throat with his Florsheim (another Communist troublemaker, good riddance)” (294-295), but instead reinforces the cruelty of both the agent and the political agenda that he represents. Elsewhere in the text, Diaz makes a similar sarcastic observation, though in a tone that merely makes fun of moral relativism, belittling the notion with playful disdain;

as a result of the rigors of La Inca's intensive prayer marathon, "one woman even lost the ability to determine right from wrong and a few years later became one of Balaguer's chief deputies" (145).

Diaz challenges poststructuralist assumptions that make it impossible to question the ruthless brutality of sadists like the capitan, or the criminality of political bosses like Balaguer, who rely on the violence of hired thugs to maintain power. Poststructuralist ambivalence regarding morality ends up undermining any possibility for the type of ethical dialogue that could foster collective action leading to progressive change. This issue emerges toward the end of the legendary Chomsky-Foucault debate in the Netherlands in 1971, when Foucault insists that challenging the dominant discourse inevitably proves to be an futile project, because one must borrow the terms of that same dominant discourse in order to critique it:

these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and one can't, however regrettable it might may be, put forward these notions to describe or justify a fight which should -- and shall in principle -- overthrow the very fundamentals of our society. <sup>112</sup>

Derrida would go much farther than this, for he maintains that because words always contain what Belsey describes as "traces of the selfsame in the other," any terms or concepts one formulates in arguing for social justice inevitably deconstruct or

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<sup>112</sup> <http://www.chomsky.info/debates/1971xxxx.htm>. p.42.

undermine themselves, leading to a muddled state of ethical ambiguity. Whose version of social justice? Whose notion of human rights? All of these subject/cultural positions are socially constructed by what Lacan refers to as the “big Other,” by language that exists independent and outside of the individual (or in Lacan’s terms, in the unconscious part of the split self from which every individual is inherently alienated); all universal principles regarding social justice and human rights and are therefore inevitably suspect.

The paradoxical result, as Christopher Butler describes it, is a form of postmodernist-poststructuralist skepticism that indirectly supports the very authoritarianism that it purports to subvert:

Postmodernists . . . seem to call for an irreducible *pluralism*, cut off from any unifying frameworks of belief that might lead to common political action, and are perpetually suspicious of domination by others. In this, they have turned against those Enlightenment ideals that underlie the legal structures of most Western democratic societies, and that aimed at *universalizable* ideals of equality and justice. Indeed, postmodernists tend to argue that Enlightenment reason, which claimed to extend its moral ideals to all in liberty, equality, and fraternity, was ‘really’ a system of repressive, Foucauldian control, and that Reason itself, particularly in its alliance with science and technology, is incipiently totalitarian. (60-61)

The unfortunate result, especially with regard to concerns about social justice and human rights, is hardly fortuitous: “For many, the postmodernist position is a disabling one -- postmodernists are just epistemological relativists, with no firm general position available to them, and so, however radical they may seem as critics, they lack a settled external

viewpoint, and this means that so far as real-life ongoing politics is concerned, they are passively conservative in effect.”<sup>113</sup>

David Hirsch criticizes poststructuralists for failing to account adequately even for the moral outrage of the European Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s; given Derrida’s position that ethical principles and truth statements must be relative because meaning can never be fixed or determined, but instead always remains subject to reinterpretation and reevaluation, universal agreement in evaluating and judging the morality of Nazi practices can never be achieved:

One of the unfortunate, but perhaps not unintended, consequences of deconstructionist nihilism is the imposition of the dogma that all human acts must remain morally undifferentiated, since *differance* exists only in the language system, only as differences in sounds and concepts, in signifiers and signifieds, so that the only difference between a collaborator and a resister is a difference in sound images. (130)

According to Hirsch, the exclusive poststructuralist focus on the nature of language, as well as ontology and epistemology, makes attempts at drawing meaningful ethical conclusions from literary work utterly ineffective as well as totally irrelevant:

The inability of European postmodernist literary theorists . . . to face the implications of the recent cultural past of Nazism and of the genocide committed on, and in the full view of, the European continent, has rendered contemporary criticism incapable of dealing with the human dimension of literature. In its concentration on the ontological status of

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<sup>113</sup> Butler, pp.60-61.

fictions and on the epistemic status of literature and of literary criticism itself, contemporary literary theory manages to enact a perpetual deferral of human reality. (115-116)

Sandra Cox raises similar concerns regarding the potentially disabling effects of poststructuralist criticism. Cox argues that both Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Edgewick Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* evoke instinctive outrage as well as moral condemnation in response to the horrendous crimes of the Trujillo dictatorship: "the texts serve a forensic function; they revise an incomplete historical narrative," by including the perspective of the dictator's victims. These novels correct:

a selectively constructed historical record by writing into the silences of the official history. . . . By giving voice, even through fiction, to those who witnessed, suffered through and survived the Trujillato, Danticat and Diaz contribute to a counter-narrative that refutes the official history from which those voices have been expunged. (110-111)

In so doing, "they apply . . . narrative pressure in an effort to suggest the making of a value judgment" on the part of readers, a judgment presumably based on an innate sense of justice that is genetically grounded in the universal moral grammar that all human beings share (110-111).

In an intellectual atmosphere dominated by moral relativism and ontological skepticism, however, the ethical force of the literary testimony that Cox describes becomes all too easily obscured, especially when individual authors are denied personal agency in employing language to convey intended meanings. According to Cox:

The disciplinary consensus in Anglophonic literary studies to refute authorial agency arises at the same approximate time that the U.S. is opened to authors occupying historically marginal subject positions . . . this suggests that authorship became unimportant to the field at the same time that most authors deemed worthy of study were no longer from a narrow and privileged minority. (112)<sup>114</sup>

Challenging authorial agency naturally leads to deconstruction of the ethical import of marginal texts, because uncertainty about who is speaking inevitably leads to confusion about what is being said. Purposefully or not, the introduction of poststructuralist skepticism thus ensures that voices once silenced will now be considered irrelevant to critical discussion. As a result, the value judgments called for by both Diaz and Danticat end up being discounted and ignored.

If it is the socially constructed language that speaks or writes, rather than the individual person who consciously employs language to express a particular intended meaning, then the author of the text he or she writes is automatically stripped of both agency and intentionality. As Arif Dirlik astutely observes, “the identity of the postcolonial is no longer structural but discursive” (332), which implies that the focus of criticism must properly be the socially constructed language system that “speaks” the author, and that continually and automatically deconstructs itself, rather than what the author is actually saying about concrete conditions in the marginalized society about

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<sup>114</sup> Cox, Sandra. “The Trujillato and Testimonial Fiction: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma and National Identity in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic Studies of the University of Auckland* 20.20 (2009): 107-126.



which he or she writes.<sup>115</sup> Thus, “the term *postcolonial*, understood in terms of its discursive thematic, excludes from its scope most of those who inhabit or hail from *postcolonial* societies” (337) [Dirlik’s emphasis]. Moreover, according to Dirlik, postcolonial-poststructuralist theory “repudiates all master narratives,” which results in “rejection of capitalism as a foundational category” (334). The consequence of this theoretical bias is that postcolonial-poststructuralist criticism “disguises the power relations that shape a seemingly shapeless world and contributes to a conceptualization of that world that . . . subverts possibilities of resistance,” reducing “into problems of subjectivity and epistemology concrete and material problems of the everyday world” (355-356). Capitalism, especially in its present, particularly malevolent transnational corporate form, is quite clearly the major cause of grave injustice in the postcolonial world, and in Western societies as well. To deny capitalism’s crucial importance (and even its existence) as a predominant existential force, as well as its relevance for discussions of human rights and social justice, obviously renders such conversations utterly meaningless.

The depersonalizing effect of transposing identity onto discourse becomes all too evident in Simon Gikandi’s dismissal of authorial agency in the letter left by the two Guinean boys who died in a desperate attempt to reach Brussels in 1998. The boys’ dying plea explicitly refers to “the suffering of the children and youth of Africa . . . Our problems are many: war, sickness, hunger, lack of education. . . . It is to you, and to you only, that we can plead our case. . . . We need your help in our struggle against poverty

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<sup>115</sup> Dirlik, Arif. “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism.” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 328-356.

and war. Be mindful of us in Africa. There is no one else for us to turn to.” Couched in poststructuralist discourse, with personal agency removed, this poignant, simply phrased yet strikingly eloquent message becomes radically reduced under Gikandi’s abstract theoretical evaluation:

Unsure of how to respond to the failure of the nationalist mandate, which promised modernization outside the tutelage of colonization, citizens of the postcolony are more likely to seek their global identity by invoking the very logic of Enlightenment that postcolonial theory was supposed to deconstruct. . . . The boys were seeking neither cultural hybridity nor ontological difference. Their quest was for a modern life in the European sense of the world [sic]; their risky journey from Africa was an attempt to escape both poverty and alterity; it was predicated on the belief that their salvation could only come from . . . Europe. (610-611)<sup>116</sup>

It is important to notice that Gikandi’s interpretation does not at all reflect what the boys actually wrote; Gikandi’s preoccupation with theory causes him to project an implausibly intellectualized motivation onto their words even as he ignores the substance of their obvious plea for social justice. It is far more likely that these boys risked their lives by taking refuge in the cargo hold of a plane to flee life-threatening deprivation than that they were “trying to get ‘there’ to be ‘like you’ ” (621). Nor does Gikandi mention possible European complicity in creating the dire social circumstances in Africa that the

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<sup>116</sup> Gikandi, Simon. “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality.” *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Guarav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005, 608-634.

boys describe, or possible European responsibility, after a half millennium of devastatingly destructive imperialism and colonization, for responding with desperately needed assistance, as the boys urgently request. It also seems beyond ironic for Gikandi to suggest that the boys might have sacrificed their lives in vain simply because they had failed to read Homi Bhabha: “The Guinean boys . . . seem to have confused the difference between the failed temporality of modernity and the time lag of postcolonial time; they were, Bhabha notwithstanding, still tethered to the myth of progress” (620).

As happens all too frequently in postcolonial-poststructuralist analysis, theory superimposes itself on the written text -- in this case the boys’ letter -- ignoring stated meaning for the sake of a preferred theoretical interpretation. A close reading of the boys’ letter suggests that they are appealing to exactly the kind of universal ethic that Appiah recommends, one that is articulated quite clearly in the iteration of the Golden Rule found in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The boys plead for assistance in the name of a shared humanity: “We beseech you on behalf of your love for your continent, your people, your families, and above all your children, whom you cherish more than life itself. And for the love of God, who has granted you all the experience, wealth, and power to ably construct and organize your continent” (610).

The boys are calling upon Europeans to recognize the rights of their fellow human beings, their biological family members, to the same core essentials for basic quality of life that Europeans would obviously insist on having for themselves and for their own children, who represent, as all children do, the human future. The boys’ appeal derives from innate principles of the Universal Moral Grammar that informs the ethical sensibility of all members of the global community. Yet postcolonial-poststructuralist

critics ignore such an appeal by discounting the boys' authorial agency; the subaltern cannot speak, for it is the discourse which structures the words he or she uses, not the subaltern as an independent, intentional person. Such a viewpoint, from Arif Dirlik's perspective, proves to be self-serving as well as convenient: "postcolonialist critics . . . and the critical orientations that they represent have acquired a respectability dependent on the conceptual needs of the social, political, and cultural problems thrown up by this new world situation" (330). Poststructuralist-postcolonial criticism "mystifies both politically and methodologically a situation that represents not the abolition but the reconfiguration of earlier forms of domination" (331). Thus, it would appear that "postcoloniality is designed to *avoid* making sense of the current [world] crisis and, in the process, to cover up the origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as beneficiaries" (353). Dirlik strongly suggests here that poststructuralism provides an ideological framework for actually justifying -- or for simply ignoring -- the ongoing crimes against humanity taking place under neoliberalism; this is the same highly problematic issue that Snipp-Walmsley refers to when he describes poststructuralism as "the logic of late capitalism."

It comes as no surprise, then, given the contemporary preponderance of poststructuralist theorization, that one encounters numerous critics who concentrate solely on the literary form of *Oscar Wao*, consistently arguing that the novel somehow undermines and contradicts itself, rather than engaging with the radical critique of predatory capitalism and obvious appeals to social justice and human rights that the text urgently expresses. Pamela J. Rader, for example, minimizes Diaz's personal agency as a writer in the creative process, contending that "Diaz's novel is his narrating character's

creation” (1), although she admits vaguely to the presence of an “author-persona speaking from the footnotes” (2) who “competes with the narrator’s tale of Oscar and his family” (4), and thus introduces a disruptive sense of skepticism regarding the veracity of the narrator’s account.<sup>117</sup>

The issue of the purpose and effect of the footnotes as subtext has received much critical attention, most of it arguing that the footnotes serve to undermine and deconstruct the fictional narrative, even though close reading of the novel reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Monica Hanna observes that “traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by accepted forms of evidence whereas Yuniors history explicitly relies on imagination and invention” (504). Yet at the same time, Hanna notes that “lesser-known historical facts [presumably “objective” and “supported by accepted forms of evidence”] . . . are often included in footnotes modeled after those of Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*” (506).

Both Chamoiseau’s and Diaz’s footnotes blend documented historical fact and imaginative reconstruction, along with authorial commentary, in such complex ways that it is often impossible to tell where these separate and how they overlap. In many instances, the footnotes seem to be merely an extrapolation of the fictional account; footnote number six in *Oscar Wao*, for just one random example, is indistinguishable in style, tone, and substance from the superimposed narrative: “being a reader/fanboy . . . helped him get through the rough days of his youth, but it made him stick out in the mean streets of Patterson even more than he already did . . . You really want to know what

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<sup>117</sup> Rader, Pamela J. “‘Trawling in Silences’: Finding Humanity in the Paginas en Blanco of History in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Label Me Latina/o* 2 (2012): 1-23.

being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto” (22). The footnote in *Texaco* that describes Julot the Mangy, for another random example, produces a similar effect: “He was a tall fellow, ye big, no thicker than a sigh, a skeletal face with icy eyes -- his skin wore the ever-changing shades of a thousand scars” (23).<sup>118</sup> Historical fact is often peppered with authorial editorializing in both of these texts: “when twentieth-century Dominicans first uttered the word *freedom* en masse the demon they summoned was Balaguer” (*Oscar Wao* 90); for those aspiring to become affranches -- slaves who eventually won their freedom -- “There a thousand and seven hundred and fifty twelve thirteen ways [sic], of which all slaves dreamed in their quarters. The governors who read the consequences in the city police reports had nightmares” (*Texaco* 67). Chamoiseau and Diaz both hopelessly confuse the distinction between author and narrator, and do so quite deliberately. Chamoiseau the author writes himself into the text as a character with the obvious name Oiseau de Cham into *Texaco* as well as *Solibo Magnificent*; Diaz clearly does the same, under the name Yuniors, in much of *Drown*, all of *Oscar Wao*, and to an uncertain extent *This Is How You Lose Her*, as well. For these two postmodernist-postcolonial writers, it is often utterly impossible to determine where the narrator begins and the author leaves off.

The correlation and conflation of author and narrator in Diaz and Chamoiseau’s fiction resonates strongly with Ramon Saldívar’s account of parabasis. The unique manner in which Diaz and Chamoiseau each blends the persona of the actual writer with that of the narrator, who appears as a semi-fictional character that is imagining and conveying the story, creates an aesthetic effect that is quite similar to the effect that

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<sup>118</sup> Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Texaco*. New York: Vintage International, 1998.

Saldivar describes. In classical Greek comedy, the chorus interrupted the drama periodically, in asides, to address the audience directly and comment on relevant issues of the day. Commedia dell'arte productions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were marked by intermittent interruptions involving variations of form to reinforce the illusory nature of the dramatic performance. In both cases, according to Saldivar, “*parabasis* consists in a rupture of the illusion of the separation between the fictional and real worlds, as the audience is drawn into the illusion at the same time that the illusion reveals itself as an illusion” (579).<sup>119</sup> Saldivar points out that Friedrich Schlegel regarded this persistent, interplay of reality and illusion as “irony.” The irresolvable ambiguity of the relationship of author and narrator manifested in the constant interplay between the narrative and footnotes in *Oscar Wao*, combined with the narrator’s persistent rhetorical strategy of direct address, sustains the tone of irony throughout Diaz’s text. Junot Diaz and Yunior function as two sides of a double or divided self.

Nevertheless, T.S. Miller, like Pamela Rader, regards the entirety of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as being entirely Yunior’s creation; thus Miller, too, discounts authorial agency. There are, according to Miller, actually “two Yuniors -- the closet nerd and the card-carrying nerd -- warring it out on the same page” (103), so that “events in the story [remain] undecidable . . . shifting the burden to [the] audience” (100). It is noteworthy that Miller consistently refers to Yunior, or to multiple Yuniors, as the author of the novel throughout her argument, as if Junot Diaz is irrelevant to the discussion; almost reluctantly, Miller concedes that Diaz does play a somewhat

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<sup>119</sup> Saldivar, Ramon. “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Posttrace Aesthetics in Contemporary Fiction.” *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 574-599.

peripheral role, yet it is one that only reinforces the text's essential ambiguity: "Diaz has designed the novel to permit a reading that ascribes . . . something defiantly postmodern and antirealist," starting with the fact that "Yunior establishes the ontological status of the fuku as contested from the beginning" (100).<sup>120</sup>

Miller does not explain exactly how Yunior establishes this uncertainty; presumably, she concurs with Monica Hanna, who claims that the initial words, "They say," on the opening page, "signals the injection of doubt from the beginning of the first sentence" (502).<sup>121</sup> Miller goes on to state unequivocally that when Yunior "proceeds to blame all of the untimely deaths in the Kennedy family and the entire Vietnam debacle on the Dominican fuku," he does so with "a sense of self-conscious absurdity" (101), disregarding the fact that Diaz, given the context of comments elsewhere in the narrative and throughout his fiction, would probably, and quite seriously, contend instead that what occurred in Vietnam was closer to genocide than a "debacle" for the victims, and would also insist that the fuku is a manifestation of the effects of predatory capitalism extending far beyond the shores of Hispaniola. The phrase "they say" represents standard story telling technique that in no way necessarily casts doubt on the veracity of the ensuing narrative. Therefore the key phrase in the opening sentence of *Oscar Wao* should more aptly be regarded as "the screams of the enslaved," an allusion to grave injustice that makes it clear that the fuku will be a matter of serious concern, rather than ambiguity, throughout the text.

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<sup>120</sup> Miller, T.S. "Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Science Fiction Studies* 38 (2011): 92-114.

<sup>121</sup> Hanna, Monica. "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Callaloo* 33.2 (2010): 498-520.



Endless debate over the precise ontological/epistemic relationship of Diaz-as-author to Yuniór-as-narrator can only prove ultimately fruitless, like attempting to stand on one's own head. In the title story of *This Is How You Lose Her*, there is a strong suggestion, based on circumstantial evidence (such as teaching creative writing in Cambridge, for example), that Diaz himself closely resembles the narrator, whose sexual politics in that account seem nearly as problematical as Yuniór's in *Oscar Wao*. As Pamela Rader appropriately concedes, "the novel's characters are created by Diaz who suggests that they are imagined by his first person narrator Yuniór" (6); thus, it is only logical to conclude that, while keeping a close eye on Yuniór as a character in the story, the reader must also pay careful attention to indications of Diaz's implied perspective as author of the text. Diaz attests to this tension in an interview with Katherine Miranda, pointing out that the thing that is "really dangerous about the novel, why Yuniór's such a scary narrator, is because he's so incredibly charming . . . He's a fucking winner, people like this guy. And he's a horror" (36), chiefly because of his constant philandering.<sup>122</sup>

According to Diaz, focusing solely on Yuniór's perspective as narrator can cause one to misunderstand the central argument of the text, so that "many readers miss the novel's lessons" (34). There can be no doubt that the narrative is deliberately designed to confront readers with compelling issues regarding social justice; therefore the question of the actual status of the fuku, and the possibility of a zafa for dispelling its chronic, malignant effects, must be regarded as a central focus for interpreting Oscar's story. Ramon Saldivar argues that "justice, poetic or otherwise, is precisely what we do *not* get

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<sup>122</sup> Miranda, Katherine. "Junot Diaz, Diaspora, and Redemption: Creating Progressive Imaginaries." *Sargasso* 2 (2008-09):23-39.

at the end of *Oscar Wao*” (591).<sup>123</sup> Richard Patteson, on the other hand, contends that Diaz’s novel creates a space where “Hope, language, and life fall together on one end of a kind of spectrum, staring down despair, silence, and death at the opposite end” (15).<sup>124</sup> It is obviously necessary for us to interpolate the conceptual dimensions of this stark critical discrepancy if we want to understand what Diaz means when he refers to “the novel’s lessons.”

It is essential to account for the perspective of the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* because, despite poststructuralist insistence on the social construction of language, Junot Diaz obviously subscribes to the compelling significance of personal agency in language use. If as a young immigrant he found himself culturally constructed, as well as discounted as a member of an invisible minority, language itself became an important means for reasserting Diaz’s identity as an individual:

You come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized. Then, if you’ve got the opportunity and the breathing space and the guidance, you immediately -- when you realize it -- begin to decolonize yourself. And in this process, you relearn names for yourself that you had forgotten.  
(896)<sup>125</sup>

For Diaz, language provides a crucial tool for finding the way back to one’s roots.

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<sup>123</sup> Saldivar, Ramon. “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Posttrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction.” *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 574-599.

<sup>124</sup> Patteson, Richard. “Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Ariel: A Review of International Literature* 42.3 (2012): 5-20.

<sup>125</sup> Cespedes, Diogenes and silvio Torres-Saillant. “Fiction Is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Diaz.” *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 892-907.

Diaz asserts that language establishes the bond that holds people together through shared meanings and values within a community; employing language for this purpose occurs spontaneously, and involves an intuitively understood, intrinsically creative form of dynamic human interaction: “One of the things about having childhood friends is . . . you have your own goddamn idiom. You just create this entire language, and in some ways it holds you together.” This kind of conscious, creative agency operates in and through “anyone who’s attempting to use language in an artistic enterprise . . . to say something that might even be mundane . . . in an original way. . . . language is already plastic in ways that I think are exceptional” (4).<sup>126</sup> Such flexibility makes room for playfulness, yet does not at all leave us stranded in endless ambiguity.

Linguistic science confirms this concept of language plasticity. Postcolonial-postmodern writers do not require Derridean theories of indeterminacy and “infinite iterability” to support the notion of “play” in verbal and written expression, because human language by its nature is endlessly creative. Derrida’s intuitive insight was correct; he just got the linguistic science wrong, which has led to unnecessary confusion: individual words are not *infinitely* iterable; “dog” can never “really” mean “cat.” But people can indeed design and combine words to form an infinite variety of sentences and verbal expressions. Noam Chomsky points out that every time we walk down the street, we are hearing novel linguistic formulations that have never been articulated previously, and that may never be expressed in quite the same way again. Unique phrases that are particularly catchy and resonant often become integrated into colloquial parlance, until

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<sup>126</sup> Celayo, Armando and David Shook. “In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Diaz.” *World Literature Today* online March 2008.

<<http://www.ou.edu/worldlit/onlinemagazine/2008march/Junot-Diazs.htm>>

some new phrase catches on and replaces them. Thus, human language continues growing and changing all the time, although language is not evolving, as some try to argue.<sup>127</sup> Language capacity appears to be the result of:

some small genetic modification that somehow rewired the brain slightly. . . . It had to have happened in a single person.<sup>128</sup> . . . [Whereby] You got an operation that enables you to take mental objects (or concepts of some

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<sup>127</sup> In recently published work, Chomsky notes that “ ‘primitive people’ . . . to all intents and purposes are identical to us. There’s no cognitively significant difference anyone can tell. If they happened to be here, they would become one of us, and they would speak English; if we were there, we would speak their languages. So far as anyone knows, there is virtually no detectable genetic difference across the species that is language-related -- and, in fact, in most other properties.” Chomsky, Noam. *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2012, p.13. This comment about genetic differences has important implications for human rights and social justice, given the possible correlation of the universal grammar for language acquisition to the universal moral grammar.

<sup>128</sup> The question arises as to why such a mutation could not have occurred in several persons at once. The answer seems to be that such a random mutation, not connected to adaptation or survival, would have to have occurred, by definition, in just a single individual. Language capacity would then have been inherited by that individual’s progeny, and then gradually spread among members of the original breeding group over a period of successive generations. In a personal communication (2/12/14), in response to a query about this issue, Noam Chomsky explained: “It’s of course conceivable [that the mutation for language occurred in several persons at once], but highly unlikely. Mutations are random events. Not too much is understood, but it would be strange if they occurred simultaneously in several individuals. Your reply is quite correct. There’s also considerable indirect evidence for the conclusion from what has been discovered about language design. There is mounting evidence that the core properties of language, syntax and semantics, satisfy conditions of computational efficiency, presumably laws of nature, and are well adapted to the conceptual-intentional interface -- the system of thought, roughly speaking -- while externalization seems to be a reflex of requirements of the sensorimotor system, even such elementary properties as linear order of words, which doesn’t seem to interact with syntax and semantics. Furthermore, externalization is quite a complex affair, including just about all language learning. That picture strongly suggests that externalization, hence of course interaction and communication, are secondary matters, “tacked on” to the core properties of language -- as we’d expect if these core properties emerged suddenly, in an isolated individual, and simply conformed to natural laws without selectional pressure. Incidentally, though I personally think this is the most plausible picture, as do some quite prominent biologists and linguists, it’s very far from the dominant views (which seem to me hopelessly confused). And of course it’s at the outer reaches of science. Evidence is thin, and hard to obtain.”

sort), already constructed, and make bigger mental objects out of them. . . .

As soon as you have that, you have an infinite variety of hierarchically structured expressions (and thoughts) available to you.<sup>129</sup>

Chomsky explains that this infinite linguistic potential is “based on an elementary property that also seems to be biologically isolated: the property of discrete infinity, which is exhibited in its purest form by the natural numbers 1,2,3, . . . a means to construct from a few dozen sounds an infinity of expressions.”<sup>130</sup> Stephen Pinker

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p.13-14.

<sup>130</sup> *The Essential Chomsky*, Ed. Anthony Arnone. New York: The New Press, 2008, p.286. In a private communication, responding to a question regarding how just 26 letters in the English language can enable us to form an infinite variety of expressions based on the property of “discrete infinity,” Chomsky replied: “The fact that we’re constantly hearing and using novel expressions, and that there is no limit to them, is the central fact about language, also the essential motive for generative grammar. It really is a truism, but is constantly denied, and it’s hard to find it articulated clearly in the millennia of study of language -- partly, I think, because it’s only in the twentieth century that a clear understanding has been developed in the formal sciences of how a finite entity (your brain, your laptop) can have infinite generative capacity, and this understanding has not spread very far. Confusion about this is constant right now even in computational cognitive science. The first clear reference I’ve been able to find is Galileo, who described the alphabet as the most remarkable of human creations, since with just a few letters it allows an infinite number of thoughts to be expressed in language. He was of course mistaken: the alphabet is just a way of recording spoken language, and it’s the language itself that has this property. Descartes’s essential argument for the existence of mind is that humans (but not animals or machines) can produce an infinite number of novel expressions that are understood by others -- and, crucially, that these are appropriate to circumstances but not caused by them, nor caused by internal states. That ‘creative aspect of language use’ (my term, not his) is his basic criterion for the existence of mind as distinct from body, and his followers devised interesting experiments on this basis to see if another creature that looks like us has a mind like ours. Curiously, almost all of this is missing from modern philosophy and even the history of philosophy (with very rare exceptions), probably because the basic concepts are not understood. I’ve written about all of this often: *Cartesian Linguistics, Language and Mind*, and often elsewhere. If you inquire with professional linguists, philosophers, cognitive scientists, etc., you’ll find that only a scattering have any familiarity with these crucial matters or understand them.”

discusses discrete infinity in some detail; Pinker concludes that there must be a generative grammar that human beings use as a code to “translate between orders of words and combinations of thoughts.”<sup>131</sup> Pinker elaborates:

A grammar is an example of a ‘discrete combinatorial system.’ A finite number of discrete elements (in this case, words) are sampled, combined, and permuted to create larger structures (in this case, sentences) with properties that are quite distinct from those of their elements. . . . In a discrete combinatorial system like language, there can be an unlimited number of completely distinct combinations with an infinite range of properties. . . . each of us is capable of uttering an *infinite* number of different sentences.<sup>132</sup>

Derrida’s contention that there is no exact correspondence between sign and signifier -- a truism in linguistics -- does not necessarily imply that semantic communication is inevitably indeterminate. Although Diaz accepts the fact that “there’s no exchange rate of language-to-experience that ever holds steady” (In Darkness 4), he also clearly concurs with Ngugi’s claim that “without conversation . . . the human community would never come to be. We would have remained like all the other components of nature, undifferentiated from it . . . Nurture out of nature is enabled by the word as language” (38).<sup>133</sup> Language makes it possible for human beings to communicate meaning efficiently and effectively enough to form collaborative

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<sup>131</sup> Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994, p.75.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, pp.75-76,77.

<sup>133</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. “For Peace, Justice, and Culture: The Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century.” *Profession* (2006): 33-39.

communities as well as highly organized societies. This easily recognized fact, along with the compelling evidence for the innate universal grammar for language acquisition attested to by Chomsky, Pinker, and many other linguists, makes it obvious that human language is not nearly as ambiguous as Derrida seems to suggest.

Language may indeed be an imperfect medium for human communication, as Derrida insists, and linguists have long understood; Chamoiseau, through the admonitory voice of his storyteller Solibo, cautions: “To write is to take the conch out of the sea to shout: here’s the conch! The word replies: where’s the sea? . . . It’s all very nice, but you just touch the distance” (28).<sup>134</sup> Yet Solibo, because he possesses the gift of language, nevertheless assures his community’s ability to endure, and embodies the common people’s abiding sense of hope. Naming him for the creole term that means “*blackman fallen to his last peg -- and no ladder to climb back up,*” the old women in the market “offered him tales, oh words of survival, stories of street smarts where the charcoal of despair watched small flames triumph over it, tales of resistance, all the ones that the slaves had forged on hot evenings so the sky wouldn’t fall.” In transmitting these allegories of human endurance that have been handed down through the generations, Solibo plays a crucial role as spokesperson for the subalterns of Martinician society: “They say his words were beautiful and knew the road to all ears, the invisible double doors which open the heart” (46).

Nowhere is the power and majesty of human language more evident or more clearly displayed in Chamoiseau’s evocative novel than during the elaborate celebration that the community organizes for the funeral of Ma Gnam:

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<sup>134</sup> Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Solibo Magnificent*. New York: Vintage International, 1999.

Solibo Magnificent . . . got on stage. *Oh language master of all things!*

The cops were speechless before him. Mouths and drums fell silent. His voice whirled, ample, then thin, broken, then warm, mellow, then crystal or shrill, and rounding off with low cavernous tones. A voice splitting with caresses, tears, enchantment, imperial and sobbing, and shaking with murmurs, dipping or fluttering along the frontiers of silent sound.” Even after the bloody beatings with billyclubs and mass arrests that ensue, Solibo’s eloquence inspires continuing celebration and irrepressible joy: “never, not ever, did that jail that I know so well resound with so much laughter, songs, riddles and jokes, and words, words, words . . . (107)

Chamoiseau’s tribute to the healing, rejuvenating power of language correlates well with Ngugi’s reminder to his global audience, in his passionate appeal for peace, justice, and culture: “Theory must always return to the earth to get recharged with new energy. For the word that breathes life is still needed to challenge the one that carries death and devastation” (33).

Junot Diaz not only extols language as a vehicle for evoking innate ethical principles and appealing for social justice, he shows no reluctance whatsoever in challenging the poststructuralist prohibition against grand narratives; thus for Diaz, the reality of the fuku is not contested at all. The curse of imperialism and predatory capitalism operates as a pervasive force not only throughout his novel, but permeates all of contemporary human affairs:

The curse of the New World is still upon us. Everything that we did in the Caribbean and the New World has had repercussions on the whole planet,



and no matter how much it changes -- how much the technology creates these new paradigms, how much hegemony alters itself and mutates to deal with a more dispersed capillary, a cow of power -- the very brutal, racialized, hierarchical, Neolithic inhumanity of the 'conquest' of the New World, that moment we've not escaped from. We're still there, we're still in it. That's why the Caribbean is such a fascinating place. It's the site of the original sin upon which all of this is based. (In Darkness 8-9)

Instead of causing irresolvable uncertainty, language can create an alternative historical narrative that defies the conventions of hegemonic ideology; by incorporating the testimony of victims, language enables the human community to begin an honest assessment of the past as well as the present, with an eye toward building a more sane, just, and equitable world:

in the end what is so fascinating . . . about language is that language is in some ways a catalog or a pantheon of our survival, because in all languages -- inside of their lexicons, inside of their syllabaries -- in there are all these survivors from past catechisms . . . people are handing these tiny relics, these small . . . fragments of their survival, forward in time. (8-9)

The writer can play a crucial role in furthering this process; he can appeal to a universal ethic and thereby awaken the innate conscience of humanity, eliciting the nobler qualities and capacities in human nature:

being part of that . . . you're helping something that's really the most human thing, because one day that's gonna have a great purpose, one day

people will remember, one day there will be a reckoning, and it's those fragments in language that are the testimonies, the testament, to what has happened. All our history, all our crimes, all the good things we've done are embedded in that thing, that fluid thing we call language. (8-9)

Far from producing ambiguity and indeterminacy regarding human affairs, language makes it possible "to give the illusion to the reader that they're inhabiting a body that didn't make it out of the abyss of exterminations . . . it's probably a good way to humanize people" (In Darkness 8-9). "Humanizing people" is obviously Diaz's purpose as the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; focusing solely on how his text supposedly undermines and deconstructs itself only distracts from our understanding of the crucial themes this novel is intended to convey.

Edwidge Danticat includes a moment of moral reckoning of the kind Diaz describes at the end of *The Farming of the Bones*, when Annabelle meets her former employer Valencia several years after the Haitian massacre has occurred. Like Nazi defendants at Nuremberg, Valencia argues that her husband remains innocent despite his active leadership and enthusiastic participation in the slaughter, because he was just following orders; Annabelle does not challenge this self-justifying rationalization openly, but she feels an irrevocable inner detachment from her childhood companion and playmate: "All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and friends. Now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting"

(300).<sup>135</sup> Annabelle identifies instead with Valencia's young servant, Sylvie, with whom she recognizes a common bond and shared desire for social justice:

Sylvie stood devotedly at [Valencia's] side. And in Sylvie's eyes was a longing I knew very well, from the memory of it as it was once carved into my younger face: I will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance that one day our fates might come to being somewhat closer and I would be granted for all my years of travail and duty an honestly gained life that in some extremely modest way would begin to resemble hers. (305-306)

Annabelle's words evoke the kind of universal ethic for which Appiah appeals, and that resonates so powerfully throughout the pages of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Catherine Belsey insists on the ambiguous nature of moral standards that might support the principle of universal equality to which Annabelle subscribes. Belsey claims that the fact that there are no exact equivalents from one language to another proves that language must be differential instead of referential; moreover, she asks, since "different languages divide the world up differently, and . . . different cultures lay claims to distinct beliefs, what, apart from habit, makes 'ours' more true than 'theirs'?" (70-71). Yet Belsey's argument that "if the things or concepts language named already existed outside language, words would have exact equivalents from one language to another" (8-9) seems less than convincing given that such exact equivalents do, in fact, exist. According to Noam Chomsky:

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<sup>135</sup> Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of the Bones*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

There often are exact equivalents, just as there are from one person to another. Where there are no exact equivalents, variation is within a narrow range. Of course, if we move to connotations, associations, etc., then variability increases, but that is not a matter of language but of variation in a host of other factors that enter into our lives.<sup>136</sup>

Belsey's insists that "different languages divide up the world differently," but this claim does not hold up under linguistic scrutiny either. Chomsky notes that a visitor from Mars "would be struck precisely by the uniformity of human languages, by the very slight variation from one language to another, and by the remarkable respects in which all languages are the same. . . . he would [also] be struck by the uniformity of human societies in every respect."<sup>137</sup> The commonly observed fact that children learn language far more efficiently than their actual experience of language can explain indicates that "in their essential properties and even down to fine detail, languages are cast to the same mold. The Martian scientist might reasonably conclude that there is a single human language, with differences only at the margins."<sup>138</sup> Catherine Belsey's insistence that proposed ethical principles that support basic human rights must be regarded as subjective and relative, rather than innate and universal, derives largely from her misunderstanding of language, and the role of human agency in language choice.

Raymond Tallis argues that the notion that language speaks us, rather than the other way around, derives from the fact that Derrida makes a crucial error when he

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<sup>136</sup> Personal communication, May 12, 2012.

<sup>137</sup> *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*. Ed. C.P. Otero. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003, p.62.

<sup>138</sup> *The Essential Chomsky*, p.289.

extends the domination of difference (absence, negativity) from the signifier and signified taken singly (where they are indubitably the playthings of absence) to the sign-as-a-whole (a step specifically warned against by Saussure), and thence to the completed speech act. This is nonsense, of course -- the speech act does not belong to the system of signifieds and signifiers. It uses the systems, but is not part of them.<sup>139</sup>

Nevertheless, poststructuralists continue to contend that language pre-exists, and therefore remains independent of the intention of the person who uses it. Lacan, blending psychoanalysis with deconstruction, labels language the “big Other,” equating it with the unconscious; according to Belsey:

The big Other is there before we are, exists outside us, and does not belong to us. . . . we necessarily borrow our terms from the Other, since we have no alternative if we want to communicate. . . . the little human organism . . . gets separated off from its surroundings and is obliged to formulate its demands in terms of the differences already available in language, however alienating these may be.<sup>140</sup>

For Tallis, the notion that language speaks or writes us is the result of a serious misinterpretation of Saussure, involving confusion over his distinction between *langue* and *parole*:

Saussure himself emphasized that the act of speech (*parole*) is an individual act of intelligence and will in which the speaker’s freedom of

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<sup>139</sup> Tallis, Raymond. “The Linguistic Unconscious: Saussure and the Post-Saussureans.” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*. Ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral. New York: Columbia U P, 2005, p.131.

<sup>140</sup> Belsey, p.58.

choice is only loosely constrained by the possibilities available in the linguistic system (*langue*). The choice is still the individual's, and the choosing is still conscious or part of an act that is conscious. Far from decentering the self, *parole* requires a centered self in order that the speech act shall be spoken and enacted. The post-Saussurean claim that it is language which speaks . . . cannot be sustained . . . *Parole* -- actual talk -- is always rooted in particular occasions, and those occasions are not intralinguistic . . . The rules of language do not specify what we say, even less how we say it, precisely because so much of what we say is prompted by events whose occurrence is not regulated by the rules of discourse.<sup>141</sup>

Tallis's argument reinforces the significance of authorial agency as well as the essentially creative and potentially transformative qualities of language that Junot Diaz espouses and emphasizes.

Along with disregard for human agency and ethical universals, poststructuralist theory is notable for its aversion to totalizing truth statements, and to what Derrida refers to as appeals to any form of "transcendent signified." According to Belsey:

If there are no pure, free-standing signifieds, we look in vain, Derrida explains, for the transcendental signified, the one true meaning that holds all the others in place, the foundational truth that exists without question and provides the answer to all subsidiary problems. Metaphysical systems of belief, laying claim to the truth, all appeal to some transcendental

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<sup>141</sup> Tallis. p.141.

signified. For Christianity this is God, for the Enlightenment reason, and for science the laws of nature. (38)<sup>142</sup>

Yet God, reason, and science cannot be equivalent, as Belsey seems to suggest they are. Religion does require belief in some form of a “God,” yet there is no way of knowing with any degree of certainty about the possible existence or exact nature of such a “transcendental signified.” If the term “God” can be said to mean anything at all, it must by definition refer to an entity that is beyond human comprehension. The human intellect is strictly circumscribed by the categories of space and time; an infinite, eternal being extends by definition far beyond the boundaries of either, and therefore must remain forever unfathomable and unknowable -- any conclusions human beings attempt to draw in that regard can only be speculative, at best, and impossible to submit for verification. Only dogmatists and authoritarians would pretend that “God” embodies “the one true meaning . . . the foundational truth that . . . provides the answer to all subsidiary problems.” For people who take the idea of God seriously, the matter ultimately reduces to incomprehensible mystery. No one can assert conclusively that God exists “without question,” or begin to describe the “foundational truth” that “God” might represent. On this question, Derrida and the poststructuralists are simply echoing the same skepticism expressed by the Enlightenment thinkers whom they purportedly scorn.

Junot Diaz, in any case, seems to believe that the indeterminacy of the concept of divinity and the inadequacy of language for conveying any clear sense of what might be involved does not at all remove the idea of God from serious consideration in the scheme of things. As with the prohibition against grand narratives, he shows himself more than

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<sup>142</sup> Belsey, p.79.

ready to defy fashionable intellectual trends, with characteristic tongue-in-cheek irony. Regarding the intensive prayer marathon that La Inca initiates after Beli is recaptured by La Fea's thugs, readers are advised: "We postmodern platanos tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the olden days, but it's exactly at these moments, when all hope has vanished, when the end draws near, that prayer has dominion." The somber tone of the second part of this compound sentence is quickly belied by the playful assurance of the opening line of the following paragraph: "Let me tell you, True Believers, in the annals of Dominican piety there has never been a prayer like this." The irony of the parabasis is reinforced throughout the hyperbole of the ensuing description, especially the reference to participants collapsing due to "shetaat" -- spiritual burnout -- and the "plucky seven-year-old whose piety, until then, had been obscured by a penchant for blowing mucus out of her nostrils like a man," lines that leave the audience hovering between amusement and skepticism. Yet the ensuing paragraph reintroduces the somber tone, suggesting that Diaz (or Yunió, and quite probably both) takes the idea of spiritual supplication quite seriously after all: "To exhaustion and beyond they prayed, to that glittering place where the flesh dies and is born again" (144-145).

Admittedly, one would have to be a "true believer" to accept such a credulous interpretation, yet this reading receives ample support from the repetition of allusions to mysterious spiritual interventions that repeat throughout the text, events that are not easily reducible to totalizing concepts of generic "magical realism." In the midst of her murderous assault by the thugs in the cane field, Beli has a vision of La Inca praying, which somehow renews her collapsing courage; she is subsequently visited by a lion-like



mongoose figure with chabine eyes who speaks to her prophetically about her unborn children, and whose song leads her out of the hopeless maze of the cane. Oscar is later visited by what he describes as the Golden Mongoose just before he dives drunkenly and despairingly off the railroad bridge (190); this same Mongoose appears in Oscar's dreams shortly after his near fatal beating at the hands of Grod and Grundy, and asks: "What will it be, muchacho? . . . More or less?" (301). Oscar's choice of "more" turns out to be pivotal not only in terms of his personal destiny, but for what Diaz refers to as the "lesson" of the novel itself.

An "Aslan-like figure with golden eyes" speaks to Oscar while he remains unconscious for three days -- like Christ in the sepulcher -- after the cane field beating; Diaz repeats the tone of ironic humor by noting that Oscar fails to comprehend what the apparition is telling him, because he "couldn't hear a word above the blare of the merengue coming from the neighbor's house" (302). Clives is about to give up his search for Oscar's broken body after the relentless beating finally ends, until he hears mysterious singing and feels the rush of a "tremendous wind . . . like the blast an angel might lay down on takeoff" (300). The rhetorical strategy of repeated direct address draws readers into participation in the narrative as if they are observing the action unfolding as it would in a film or during a stage production. The tone of pervasive irony leaves it up to the audience to decide whether Yuni6r is serious or not when he claims: "It's all true, plataneros. Through the numinous power of prayer La Inca saved the girl's life, laid an A-plus zafa on the Cabral family fuku" (155). Recourse to the spiritual realm for intervention and protection is by no means a strange -- or simply "magical" -- notion

among victims of violent oppression, for as Chamoiseau/Oiseau de Cham reminds us, “in these ill-fated times, a blackman’s prayer is never useless . . .” (*Solibo Magnificent* 86).

As with the concept of divinity, poststructuralists similarly reject the transcendental signified “Reason,” yet human reason is not a matter of ontology, like the idea of “God,” but rather an aspect of epistemology; reason is an intellectual tool that human beings employ, within the limits of space and time, to attempt to account for and explain the phenomena of experience. Reasoning can be logical or illogical, coherent or incoherent; Besley’s statement, “If there are no pure, free-standing signifieds, we look in vain . . . for the transcendental signified,” is itself a product of reason: if “a” is such and so, then “b” must logically follow. Reason can hardly be considered a “transcendental signified” at all; it does not have an independent existence in its own right, but rather is only an instrument, a means of analysis.

Of course, in situations where Reason (with a capital R) becomes touted as the only way of knowing, and is regarded as an exclusive instrument of the ruling classes, then “reason” takes on an authoritarian characteristic that needs to be challenged, as well as “deconstructed.” In *Solibo Magnificent*, Chamoiseau satirizes the Chief Inspector’s notion of reason, which reflects the rigid analytical methods he acquired during his professional training in France. The Chief Inspector incorrectly assumes that Solibo has been murdered; his unshakable faith in the absolute certainty of his logical conclusions leads him to calmly oversee the brutal torture of Congo, regardless of the more complex understandings he had developed as a child and adolescent growing up in the Caribbean, which his European education subsequently taught him to abjure:

the Chief Inspector had never liked the irrational side of ‘cases’ in this country. The initial facts were never reliable, a shadow of unreason, a hint of evil, clouded everything, and despite his long stay in the land of Descartes, since he had been raised in this country like the rest of us with the same knowledge of zombies and various evil soucougnans, the Inspector’s scientific efforts and cold logic often skidded. He stuck to it at the price of rather unpleasant mental exertion, but still dreamed for this country . . . of a mystery drawn with a compass (and a protractor). (75)

In the process of investigating the mysterious circumstances surrounding Solibo’s sudden demise, the Inspector’s cold logic reduces him, along with his underlings, to the level of a savage barbarian:

They made [Congo] undress and kneel on a square, they hammered his skull and ears with thick phone books, they kicked him . . . knocked him in the liver, the balls, the nape, they crushed his fingers and blinded him with their thumbs. He who had known so much pain and so many miseries discovered a thousand more, punctuated by the Chief Inspector’s tranquil and innocent voice asking: Who killed Solibo, Mr. Congo -- and how? . . .

One word: there was nothing human around there. (143-144)

This graphic passage resonates powerfully with the vicious beating Beli receives at the command of the imperturbable, implacable La Fea, who “had hundreds of thousands in the bank and not one yuan of pity in her soul,” and who sits “like a shelob in her web . . . Scrutinizing Beli with unflinching iguana eyes” (139-140). La Fea’s henchmen the Elvises beat Beli “like she was a slave. Like she was a dog.” Thankfully, Yunion offers to

“pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted” (147), which is disturbing enough.

Despite poststructuralist insistence, science and the laws of nature hardly qualify as transcendental signifieds, either, since there are severe limits imposed on what science can reveal due to the physiology of the human brain itself. Noam Chomsky observes, “In principle, there are almost certainly true scientific theories that our genetically determined brain structures will prevent us from ever understanding. Some of these theories may well be ones we would like to know about,”<sup>143</sup> but cannot understand now and presumably never will -- precisely because of the way our brains are wired. Such limits were recognized from the earliest stages of the scientific revolution; according to Chomsky:

The apparent inadequacies of mechanical explanation for cohesion, attraction, and other phenomena led Galileo finally to reject ‘the vain presumption of understanding everything’ . . . . Newton demonstrated . . . that nothing in nature falls within the mechanical model of intelligibility that seemed to be the merest common sense to the creators of modern science. (77-78)

Therefore scientists have been forced to conclude that “the natural world is not comprehensible to human intelligence, at least in the sense anticipated by the founders of modern science. (77-78)

Rather than constituting “transcendental signifieds,” reason and science instead represent sustained human efforts over the past several centuries to subvert authoritarian

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<sup>143</sup> *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, p.54.

practices and absolute truth claims posited in the name of “God” by various religions -- primarily Christianity in European history. Science, relying on empirical observation along with rational analysis, seeks deeper explanations for the phenomena of experience than the absolutist formulations offered by abstract theology. Far from “foundational truth,” what reason and scientific investigation reveal entails only partial understanding, incomplete knowledge that is subject to further revision as new data is examined and innovative observational and analytical methodologies are developed. John Ellis emphasizes that as far as science is concerned, “all knowledge is in the nature of a hypothesis . . . the only test of the validity of a scientific proposition is the always provisional assent of the scientific community” (101).<sup>144</sup> One is hardly asserting “totalizing truth claims” from the experimental laboratory: “Science,” Chomsky informs us, “is tentative, exploratory, questioning, mostly learned by doing.”<sup>145</sup>

This tentative, incremental, open-ended aspect of what reason and science reveal, furthermore, challenges authority rather than substituting for it; in this sense, rational inquiry can be seen as crucial for ongoing human emancipation from the totalizing claims and authoritarian control asserted by religious dogma. Daniel C. Dennett, philosopher of science at Tufts University, maintains, “When philosophers [of science] argue about truth, they are arguing about how not to inflate the truth about truth into the Truth about Truth, some absolutistic doctrine that makes indefensible demands on our systems of

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<sup>144</sup> Ellis, John. “Is Theory to Blame?” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*. Ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral. New York: Columbia U P, 2005.

<sup>145</sup> *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*. p.91.

thought.”<sup>146</sup> Chomsky assures us that, rather than taking the place of “God” as transcendental signified:

science survives by constant challenge to established thinking. Successful education in the sciences seeks to encourage students to initiate such challenges and to pursue them. Individuals and society at large benefit to the extent that these liberatory ideals extend throughout the educational system -- in fact, far beyond.<sup>147</sup>

The implications of the final phrase, “in fact, far beyond,” are quite significant, for they imply that scientific inquiry enhances the possibility for human freedom generally, an ideal that extends back not only to the Enlightenment, but throughout intellectual history. Yet poststructuralists, with their totalizing claim that “truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing frameworks of the judging subject,”<sup>148</sup> reductively presume that scientific theories (along with historical accounts) are themselves only fiction: “even the arguments of scientists and historians are to be seen as no more than quasi narratives which compete with all the others for acceptance.

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<sup>146</sup> Dennett, Daniel C. “Postmodernism and Truth.” World Congress of Philosophy, August 13, 1998, p.4-5. <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/postmod.tru.htm>. Dennett notes earlier in his presentation that postmodernist/poststructuralist theorists regard their skepticism about science as “a sophisticated appreciation of the futility of proof and the relativity of all knowledge claims. In fact this opinion, far from being sophisticated, is the height of sheltered naiveté, made possible only by flatfooted ignorance of the proven methods of scientific truth-seeking and their power. Like many another naïf, these thinkers, reflecting on the manifest inability of *their* methods of truth-seeking to achieve stable and valuable results, innocently generalize from their own cases and conclude that nobody *else* knows how to discover truth either.” p.3-4.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. p.198.

<sup>148</sup> Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002, p.16.

They have no unique or reliable fit to the world, no certain correspondence with reality. They are just another form of fiction.”<sup>149</sup>

Ironically, the dogmatic skepticism of poststructuralism turns out to be just another form of foundational absolutism in its own right, a self-enclosed theoretical paradigm that shuts down inquiry rather than opening up investigation and encouraging further conversation. As Denis Donoghue wryly observes:

Theory as an institution is like Theology in one respect: it makes foundational claims, it starts from a posited ground and works up and out from that source. It differs from Theology mainly because it hasn't anything to say of first and last things. Theory is related to Philosophy, but the relation is juridical rather than discursive: it doesn't take part in a conversation. Instead, it aspires to have the attributes of a science . . . That is to say, Theory aspires to universal application. (111)<sup>150</sup>

The doctrine that language must be regarded as differential and that language pre-exists our knowledge of it relies on the assumption that language is learned only through experience. The science of linguistics radically challenges that assumption. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont disparage poststructuralists' general skepticism regarding science, charging that by:

either using scientific ideas totally out of context, without giving the slightest empirical or conceptual justification . . . or throwing around scientific jargon to their nonscientist readers without any regard for its

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid. p.15.

<sup>150</sup> Donoghue, Denis. "Theory, Theories, and Principles." *Theory's Empire*. Ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral. New York: Columbia U P, 2005.

relevance or even its meaning,” poststructuralists foster “epistemic relativism . . . the idea . . . that modern science is nothing more than a ‘myth,’ a ‘narration,’ or a ‘social construction.’ (538)

Such skepticism results in serious intellectual misunderstandings, “a number of confusions that are rather frequent in post-modernist and cultural-studies circles: for example, abusing ideas from the philosophy of science such as the underdetermination of theory by evidence or the theory-dependence of observation in order to support radical relativism.”<sup>151</sup>

The main danger with poststructuralist claims about knowledge is that they tend to substitute one form of totalizing authoritarianism for another -- in David Hirsch’s words, “the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth.” Inaccurate characterization of the nature and scope of scientific inquiry narrows the range of human understanding and leads to overreliance on abstract theorization that resists testing and verification through empirical observation and analysis. Poststructuralists’ claims that human language is entirely socially constructed, and is learned solely through experience, are not sustainable in the light of close observation of language learning in infants and young children. Chomsky notes, “We know . . . that human infants instantly and reflexively extricate language-relevant data from the blooming, buzzing confusion [around them], no trivial task . . . They also quickly acquire knowledge of the prosodic structure of their language (in part pre-natally, it appears), and of the phonology generally.”<sup>152</sup> This shows “that we

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<sup>151</sup> Bricmont, Jean and Alan Sokal. “The Furor Over *Impostures Intellectuelles*: What Is All the Fuss About?” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*. New York: Columbia U P, 2005, p.538.

<sup>152</sup> Chomsky, Noam. Language Development Symposium, Boston University, November, 2001. “Language and Other Cognitive Systems: What Is Special About Language?” p.8.



humans have explicit and highly articulate linguistic knowledge that simply has no basis in linguistic experience.”<sup>153</sup> Language acquisition, therefore, is not merely the product of gradual socialization; the “representation and use of language involve specific neural structures, though their nature is not clearly understood . . . [which constitute a] language organ [that] interacts with early experience and matures into the grammar of the language that the child speaks.”<sup>154</sup> In other words, empirical observation confirms that language learning must be a function of our brain structure,<sup>155</sup> as well as a product of socialization, “because there is really no other way to account for the fact that children learn to speak in the first place.”<sup>156</sup>

Steven Pinker observes that, however arbitrary a sign may be, there still exists the:

wholly conventional pairing of the sound with the meaning . . . every English speaker [for example] has undergone an identical act of rote learning in childhood that links the sound to the meaning. For the price of this standardized memorization, the members of a language community

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<sup>153</sup> *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, p.47.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* p.46.

<sup>155</sup> Chomsky elaborates on this point further: “A careful look at the interpretation of expressions reveals very quickly that from the earliest stages, the child knows vastly more than experience has provided. This is true even of simple words. At peak periods of language growth, a child is acquiring words at a rate of about one an hour, with extremely limited exposure under highly ambiguous conditions. The words are understood in delicate and intricate ways that are far beyond the reach of any dictionary, and are only beginning to be investigated. When we move beyond simple words, the conclusion becomes even more dramatic. Language acquisition seems much like the growth of organs generally; it is something that happens to a child, not that the child does. And while the environment plainly matters, the general course of development and the basic features of what emerges are predetermined by the initial state . . . [which] is a common human possession.” *The Essential Chomsky*, pp.288-89.

<sup>156</sup> *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, p.45.

receive an enormous benefit: the ability to convey a concept from mind to mind virtually instantaneously. (75-76, 78)

Furthermore, “we use a code to translate between orders of words and combinations of thoughts. That code, or set of rules, is called a generative grammar.” Pinker concludes, “The way language works, then, is that each person’s brain contains a lexicon of words and the concepts they stand for (a mental dictionary) and a set of rules that combine the words to convey the relationships among concepts (a mental grammar).” Significantly, this code is “*autonomous* from cognition.” [Pinker’s emphasis.]<sup>157</sup>

Derrida and the poststructuralists insist that language exists outside us, and can only be understood differentially. Yet if Chomsky and Pinker are correct, language actually generates autonomously from within the physiology of the human brain, which correlates with Tallis’s claim that Saussure insists on a distinction between the language system (*langue*) and language use (*parole*), as well as the free agency of the speaker. The existence of an internalized code or grammar also necessarily delimits the ways in which words can be used in sentences, as well as the possible connotations they may allow; thus, there can be no such thing as “infinite iterability,” which is to say that all binaries cannot be resolved simply in terms of difference. As Pinker notes, “syntax and sense can be independent of each other.”<sup>158</sup>

Christopher Butler notes that postmodern fiction “enacts a disturbingly skeptical triumph over our sense of reality, and hence also over the accepted narratives of history” (79). Yet history cannot be simply whatever the individual decides it to be; responsible

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<sup>157</sup> *The Language Instinct*, pp.75-76,78.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

historical accounts must include evaluation of verifiable facts which, however incomplete and subject to individual interpretation, nevertheless require acknowledgment, as well as collective assessment. Even though language is malleable, and must allow for multiple voices and perspectives, including marginalized counter-discourses deriving from wholly analogical, fantastical, non-traditional forms of “writing” such as animes, comic books, role play and video games, and so forth, neither the limitations nor iterability of linguistic expression prevents us from drawing reasonable conclusions about our collective past, shared present, and common prospects for the future. The limitations of language neither confine us to subjectivism, nor reduce us to moral relativism. We are fully capable of stringing together the threads provided by various discourses, and combining polyglot voices, including folklore, superstition, legends and traditional belief systems, into a syncretic, synthetic narrative which, while not “grand” in Lyotard’s sense, still enables us to arrive at a certain degree of reasonable consensus, however partial and incomplete.

It is hardly necessary to subscribe to poststructuralist theory to support the playfulness and inherent creativity of human language, nor is poststructuralist analysis required in order to deconstruct dominant discourse, if we follow the suggestion of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin: “we distinguish . . . between the ‘standard’ British English inherited from the Empire and the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries. . . . the english of Jamaicans is not the english of Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans.” These critics go on to argue that, since “place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature to all post-colonial literatures in english . . . adequate account of this practice must go beyond the usual categories of social alienation such as master/slave; free/bonded; ruler/ruled,” for

“alienation is inevitable until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as English.” Postcolonial writers, then, “need . . . to escape from the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached, its aesthetic and social values, the formal and historically limited constraints of genre, and the oppressive political and cultural assertion of metropolitan dominance, of center over margin. . . . The energizing feature of this displacement is its capacity to interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations.”<sup>159</sup>

Poststructuralist assumptions paradoxically emphasize the play of language in terms of infinite iterability on one hand, even as they describe the socially constructed nature of language as overwhelmingly delimiting, as well as constraining, on the other. James Tar Tsaiior maintains that “English . . . is the privileged linguistic category exercising epistemological tyranny over other subordinated polyphonic or multiple, creolized or marginalized tongues. The ascendancy of English over the babel of languages was a colonialist and imperialist ideological strategy to institute the dominance of Empire and European imperial culture” (630).<sup>160</sup> Lindsay Aegerter, referring to Michelle Cliff’s fiction, reflects a similar attitude toward what she regards as the highly restrictive function of language as a social construct, one that severely impedes the writer’s ability not only to challenge dominant discourse, but even to discover a personal identity and find an authentic voice. Aegerter argues that Cliff “must . . . appropriate the language that has taught her to despise herself and her cultural heritage . . . Her redefinition of self means using the language that has denied her personal and cultural

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<sup>159</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 1989, pp.8-11.

<sup>160</sup> Tsaiior, James Tar. “Themes in Caribbean Literature.” *An Encyclopedia of the Arts* 4.6 (2006): 624-634.

wholeness to *find* or retrieve that wholeness -- using hegemonic language to resist hegemony” (901) [Aegerter’s emphasis].<sup>161</sup> According to Aegerter, Cliff’s “personal and cultural identity have been constructed . . . there is a difference between her selfhood and her ‘subjectivity’ . . . [Cliff is] a subject constructed in and by language,” and thus finds herself forced to confront “the primacy of language to identity” (902).

Yet this poststructuralist position confuses the nature of language with the way in which language is used. Certain postcolonial writers find English not only appropriate for self-expression, but actually preferable; Braj Kachru, for example, insists that “English . . . has acquired a *neutrality* in a linguistic context where native languages are functionally marked in terms of caste, religion, region, and so forth” (272).<sup>162</sup> Kachru is careful to discriminate between the nature of language and the use to which it is put: “The medium in non-native, but the message is not” (274). Raj Rao similarly appreciates the flexibility -- what Junot Diaz refers to as the “plasticity” -- of language, its capacity as a medium for creative, innovative expression, wholly independent of cultural constraints: “English is not really an alien language to us . . . We are instinctively bilingual. . . . Our method of expression . . . has to be dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American.”<sup>163</sup> Rao’s phrase “instinctively bilingual” reflects the fact of the underlying uniformity of human languages that Noam Chomsky describes.

In the 2008 interview, “In Darkness We Meet,” Junot Diaz emphasizes the self-conscious strategy behind his polyglot approach to writing: “Language eludes any

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<sup>161</sup> Aegerter, Lindsay Pentolfe. “Michelle Cliff and the Paradox of Privilege.” *College English* 59.8 (1997): 898-915.

<sup>162</sup> Kachru, Braj B. “The Alchemy of English.” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 276.

attempt anyone has [i.e. makes] to control it. So, it's always weird when people feel that there's this sense of ownership in a language and that people try to use it to victimize other people, because language just doesn't work that way" (3). By incorporating numerous Spanish words and phrases in an otherwise English text, which itself is a mix of formal, inner-city, hip-hop, sci-fi, fantasy, horror and comic book dialectical variations, Diaz creates a compelling counter discourse by interpolating the juncture where languages intersect. He emphasizes that in order to sustain an effective alternative narrative one must include multiple perspectives and voices, and even multiple languages, as well as mixed forms of language that result when languages interpenetrate and intermingle, as they do throughout *Oscar Wao*. The languages interacting throughout the text include not only Spanish and English, but also American "street language," as well as the marginalized discourses of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Diaz describes science fiction as having been "imported" from France and England; he includes the "indigenous" languages created by comic books and the blues, which Diaz insists have been "an important part of what we call the North American narrative, what we would call the formative literary experience" (4). All of these must be incorporated into the reexamination and reevaluation of the contemporary world that Diaz inhabits as both a Dominican and an American.

Diaz is quite deliberate in his efforts to challenge not only the dominance of Western intellectual paradigms, but the very integrity of English as a distinctive language. By incorporating numerous Spanish words and phrases, he is creating what amounts to a linguistic hybrid; he regards the resulting interpenetration of tongues as a crucial part of the process of cultural liberation and decolonization:

for me, allowing the Spanish to exist in my texts without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language . . . Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominately English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. . . . When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back into English, forcing it to deal with language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English. (904)<sup>164</sup>

Much of the “violence” of English acquisition that Diaz describes here stems from the fact that the immigrant quickly discovers how many forms of English he is being forced to assimilate and master all at once:

your mind kind of torments you with every mistake you’ve made, preparing yourself against this ideal that doesn’t exist anywhere . . . one discovers very quickly as an immigrant kid that there’s English acquisition and then there’s *English* acquisition, that there is this almost endless array of vernaculars that you have to pick up . . . you keep stacking up all these little languages, these threads. (In Darkness 4)

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<sup>164</sup> Cespedes, Diogenes and Silvio Torres-Saillant. “Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Diaz.” *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 892-907.

Diaz elaborates on the extreme contrast in living spaces within Third World Dominican Republic and First World United States, discrepancies so vast and incomprehensible that it seems like shuttling back and forth between distant planets. The language of sci-fi becomes essential for describing immigrant experience, Diaz argues, because the intergalactic space separating these two radically different societies challenges the limits of language to the very limit; in attempting to describe the process of transition, acculturation, and assimilation, Diaz initially found himself completely perplexed:

how in the world to describe the extreme experience of being an immigrant in the United States, the extreme experience of coming from the Third World and suddenly appearing in New Jersey. . . . Every language I was deploying, every language system, fell apart. . . . every time I tried to use a narrative to take me from here to there, it disintegrated, as soon as it reached that -- I don't know how to call it -- world barrier. But science fiction, fantasy, and comic books are *meant* to do this stupid kind of stuff, they're meant to talk about these extreme, ludicrous transformations, and so I really wanted to use them. I felt a great kinship to these narratives, which served as a backbone for so much of what we call 'America' but are completely ostracized; it felt like the history of the immigrant, the minority, the woman. I was like, Yo, we're friends. In darkness we meet. (4)

Although Diaz does not refer to the language of horror in this passage, it plays a distinct role in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (the reference to *Twilight Zone*



and the similarity of Trujillo to Anthony in Peaksville on page 224 is one prominent example); he picks the topic up later in the interview while describing the emigrant's experience: "you're trying to talk about how immigration is used as the way to shake off history, but also to smuggle it with you without even knowing it. It's like the horror movie where the guy leaves the island, he's like, Whew -- you know -- and the little thing is clinging to the back of his suitcase" (7). This ghost in suitcase conveys interesting implications, for it reinforces the idea that citizens in the receiving country will also be challenged to assimilate to the immigrant, perhaps just as much as the other way around; instinctive fears of immigration may not stem just from racial bias and fear of job competition alone. Who knows what unwelcome, unexpected horrors might be included in the immigrant's baggage? Is it possible he brings with him the germs of the fuku? And how can one ever expect to be able to screen successfully for an insidious pathogen like that? Are citizens in the United States going to be forced to pay for ongoing injustices elsewhere that they are completely unaware of, or that they choose to deny or ignore, yet in which they remain necessarily complicit, whether they want to acknowledge it or not?

Diaz elaborates on the role comic books play in creating a space for articulating the immigrant's journey. He compares the contrasting worlds he experiences in the Dominican Republic and the United States to Billy Batson and Captain Marvel:

Billy Batson, the normal guy, suddenly says *shazam!* And turns into this superbeing. And in some ways it's basically what happens. Santo Domingo's typical-normal, we think the Third World's commiseration and suffering is normal, and the United States is this superbeing. And so I kept wondering, What the fuck? Where's my role in this? And you find

yourself neither. The joke is you're neither Billy Batson or Captain Marvel, you're basically *shazam!*, you're the word, you're that lightning that transforms, that runs back and forth between them and holds them together . . . part of this narrative was trying to write the lightning. (In Darkness 7)

Far from deconstructing or undermining itself, writing the lightning interpolates the blank spaces between various languages, dialects, narratives, ideologies, nationalities, races, ethnicities, theologies, customs, and traditions. Transcending ambiguities, writing the lightning disentangles Tower of Babel babble and the confusion of conflicting voices and contradictory accounts. Writing the lightning appeals to a universal ethic and sounds a clarion call for global social justice. Writing the lightning plants seeds of deeper human understanding, leading to the promise of mutual cooperation that can develop, expand, and grow through ongoing conversation in a rapidly shrinking, beleaguered world, where technology facilitates international communication in ways never dreamed possible before. Writing the lightning creates “the testimonies, the testament to what has happened,” enabling us to account for and come to terms with our collective past, a necessary step toward establishing egalitarian harmony in the present, reassured of a brighter, collectively prosperous human future. The writer of lightning, in the terminology of Ngugi’s impassioned appeal for world peace, is “working in the tradition of the first intellectual who made the word become flesh” (39) -- whose story is recounted in the New Testament, one of the principal grounding discourses, on both sides of the colonizer-colonized divide, in all of human history. Writing the lightning enables humanity, at last, to respond to Anacoana’s plea, in the face of her own death and the

imminent destruction of her people, that human beings finally cast aside destructive differences and build an abiding bridge of love.

## Dispelling the Imperial Curse

Junot Diaz refers to “the Doom of the Cabrals” (143), and also explicitly compares this doom (or fuku) to the curse placed on the House of Atreus in Greek mythology: “There are still many, on and off the island, who offer Beli’s near-fatal beating as irrefutable proof that the House Cabral was indeed the victim of a high-level fuku, the local version of House Atreus” (152). A strong parallel exists between the fate of the Cabrals and the House of Atreus saga in one respect: every member of Abelard’s family either dies or ends up exiled in diaspora. Yet the Atreus family dooms itself; fathers turn against sons and vice versa, brothers betray and cuckold brothers, wives cheat on their husbands. One woman murders her husband, with encouragement from her young lover. Another family member rapes his daughter, producing a son for whom he is both father and grandfather; this son murders his great uncle, after seducing his wife, only to be killed in turn by his cousin. Clearly, the curse that dooms the House of Atreus is self-inflicted; the family disaster derives directly from human agency, from the violent rages, lethal jealousies, ruthless ambitions, and calculated treacheries of individual family members. Only when Agamemnon’s son Orestes finally summons the necessary courage to kill his own mother, along with her lover, to avenge his father’s murder, does the family curse finally lift.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> One cannot help but wonder if Shakespeare had this story in mind when he wrote *Hamlet*; certainly, he would have been aware of it, along with the Danish legend. Like Hamlet, Orestes is the rightful heir to the throne, but has been usurped by a relative who entered into an incestuous relationship with his mother. There are important differences, to be sure; it is not clear, for example, from looking at various Shakespeare folios, whether Gertrude was actually aware of Claudius’ plans to kill her husband. In an earlier version of the play, she is; in a later folio, it appears she is not complicit in the murder. Either way, the play ends in general catastrophe: all the principal characters are dead; the state of Denmark has been conquered by Norway, its arch enemy. If Hamlet had shown Orestes’ resolve, he

All the members of the Cabral family, in striking contrast, are innocent victims of a malevolence that strikes from the outside; the tragedy that befalls them derives not from some inner flaw, but from an invading evil, in the same way that undeserved disaster befell peaceful Arawaks upon the arrival of Columbus. (This is not to suggest any kind of exoticized ontological continuity between Arawaks, Caribs, and the Cabrals, but simply to reinforce the fact that the terrible fate that strikes each stems from outside human agency rather than some mysterious occult force.) In any case, there are no obvious reasons why Cabral family members should be held personally responsible for precipitating their awful destiny.<sup>166</sup>

Abelard Cabral is a timid man, a well-to-do, highly regarded professional who prefers to see-no-evil-hear-no-evil-speak-no-evil as far as Trujillo is concerned; he is not someone who feels inclined to take strong stands on moral issues: “Abelard had a reputation for being able to keep his head *down* during the worst of the regime’s madness” (footnote #24, 215) -- referring to the notorious machete massacre of Haitians in 1937. Dr. Cabral was fully aware of what was going on, since he and his wife Socorro treated so many of the massacre’s horribly wounded victims, but he counted in vain on these kinds of atrocities always happening to somebody else. Abelard preferred to ignore Trujillo’s crimes against others, relying on his privileged social status to protect him and

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would have avenged his father’s murder and taken his rightful place on the throne. Denmark would have maintained its integrity as a state, the evil introduced by Claudius, possibly in conjunction with Gertrude, would have been redressed, and whatever curse or doom was operative would have been dispelled. This is an important consideration, for there is a clear suggestion throughout Diaz’s novel that it is *human* decisions that create a “doom,” “curse,” or “fuku,” not some mysterious, supernatural, other-worldly force.  
<sup>166</sup> Except perhaps that Abelard, Hamlet-like, remains mired in indecision over whether to accept Lydia’s assistance in getting his family off the island before it is too late; he remains indecisive until it does become, in fact, too late.

his family. Abelard and his family feel comfortably insulated from the suffering of their fellow Dominicans: “While the rest of the country in that period subsisted on rocks and scraps of yuca and were lost to endless coils of intestinal worms, the Cabrals dined on pastas and sweet Italian sausages, scraped Jalisco silver on flatware from Beleek. . . . The Cabrals were, as you might have guessed, members of the Fortunate People” (212-213).

Yet Abelard’s ostrich act hardly compares to killing and cooking one’s son or impregnating one’s daughter, feeding a brother’s children to him for supper, or stabbing one’s husband to death as he steps, trusting and vulnerable, out of his welcome-home bath. Abelard is simply not the political activist or subversive type; he is a scholar, a scientist, a physician. That surely does not excuse him for ignoring Trujillo’s atrocities, but it does suggest that he understood his professional role and remained steadfastly faithful to it. In any case, most of Abelard’s colleagues and compatriots show no more courage than he does, and many of them -- especially those who actually *volunteered* their daughters as sacrifices to the insatiable lust of the Goat, as many fathers apparently did (a fact that is graphically depicted by Mario Vargas Llosa) -- show far less.<sup>167</sup>

Dr. Abelard Cabral is a well-meaning but politically disengaged individual who persists in hoping that Trujillo will simply disappear; after the dictator is removed from the scene, presumably, the country would somehow magically transform into a democracy. Cabral is quite naïve, of course; he fails to perceive that the Dominican Republic’s powerful neighbor to the north -- albeit a “good neighbor,” in FDR’s terms, insofar as the Dominican Republic served U.S. business interests -- would never allow actual democracy for Dominicans (or any other Latin Americans), since anything more

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<sup>167</sup> Llosa, Mario Vargas. *The Feast of the Goat*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

than democracy in-name-only might interfere with U.S. corporate profits. Despite Trujillo's assassination and his replacement by the sophisticated, urbane Joaquin Balaguer (who is valorized by Vargas Llosa), "Santo Domingo," Yunior advises us, "never became a democracy" (227), and still has not, more than a half century later. Current poverty levels in the Dominican Republic have reached catastrophic levels. Today, according to Jeb Sprague, "the population exhibits a high poverty rate of 44%, with an additional 26% of the population in extreme poverty," for a staggering total of 70% of Dominicans now existing at or below bare subsistence levels.<sup>168</sup>

For all his timidity, Abelard actually demonstrates remarkable courage in refusing to make his daughter Jacquelyn available to Trujillo; exhibiting a surprising fortitude that can only be attributed to the inspiring power of paternal love and fatherly devotion, he disregards all concern for his own safety -- with devastating personal consequences -- in his determination to protect her: "It was a Brave Thing, not in keeping with his character, but he'd only had to watch Jacquelyn preparing for school one day, big in body but still a child, goddamn it, still a child, and the Brave Thing became easy" (217). The principled, self-sacrificing stand that Abelard takes in resisting the evil that threatens Jacquelyn, his stubborn willingness to fight back against the fuku embodied in Trujillo's predatory lust, serves as prototype for the extraordinary valor later displayed by Beli and by Oscar in their turn. Each succeeding generation of the Cabral family, in striking contrast to the House of Atreus, musters sufficient strength and audacity to defy violent, overwhelming malevolence for the sake of human love.

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<sup>168</sup> Sprague, Jeb. "Can Coalition and Cross-Border Solidarity Save Hispaniola? Dysfunctional Island." *CounterPunch* 20.8 (2013): 22-24.

Abelard is well aware of the risk he is taking, yet he never wavers in his resolve to protect Jacquelyn, even though he anguishes over the issue and often flies into useless fits of despairing exasperation: “Alternated between impotent rage and pathetic self-pity. . . . it’s madness! Sheer madness! I’m the father of my household! I’m the one who says what goes!” (229).<sup>169</sup> In the end, Abelard’s downfall clearly results from his refusal to surrender his daughter to Trujillo. Thus, it is obvious that in the case of the House of Cabral, whatever doom or curse assails individual family members stems not from any wrongdoing on Abelard or his family’s part, but rather from the evil actions of others that penetrate their relatively innocent lives from the outside -- that is, from Trujillo’s carefully calculated malevolence, along with that of the entire despotic system he has set up, which is maintained by Balaguer after him, at staggering human cost, with crucial support from powerful global institutions such as the United States government and Roman Catholic Church. In his growing desperation to save Jacquelyn, Abelard, usually a non-practitioner, finally resorts to religion to seek divine assistance -- a futile move, Yunion points out: “Things got so bad with him that he even went to church, a first for Abelard (which might have been a really bad idea since everybody knew the Church at that time was in Trujillo’s pocket)” (231).

Critics debate the role that the fuku plays in the Cabral family tragedy due to what Monica Hanna regards as the “dialectic between skepticism and belief” (500-501) in

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<sup>169</sup> El Jefe usurped the parental authority of all fathers on the island, regardless of status or class, assuming the role of supreme patriarch -- Dominican “macho” extrapolated to the extreme. Balaguer’s phrase “God and Trujillo,” makes the point, though perhaps the Boss would have preferred that the word order be reversed.



Yunior's attitude toward the idea of a family curse.<sup>170</sup> T.S. Miller sees the notion of fuku throughout the text of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as mediated through "the lens of sci fi narratives," and concludes that the concept becomes problematic and indeterminable because of "Yunior's sometimes equivocal yet always self-undermining attitude toward science fiction" (96).<sup>171</sup> Yet it is not at all obvious that the attitude toward science fiction in *Oscar Wao* is "always self-undermining," as Miller claims. Certainly Yunior is aware of the improbable nature of the discourses from which he borrows, yet, as Junot Diaz explains in remarks to Edgwick Danticat, these outlandish discourses, given the topic at hand, are often the only ones that fit:

If you're looking for language that will help you approach our nigh-unbearable historical experiences you can reach for narratives of the impossible: sci-fi, horror, fantasy . . . the metaphors that the genres have established . . . can be reclaimed and subverted and expanded in useful ways that clarify and immediate-ize our own histories. (92)<sup>172</sup>

Adding further to the notion that the text of *Oscar Wao* is generally "self-undermining," Miller contends that Abelard's downfall is linked to a lost book that he may or may not have been writing about Trujillo's supposed supernatural powers: "the fifth chapter, the story of Oscar's grandfather Abelard, most takes on the character of a secret history" (97). According to Miller, Yunior "often chooses to describe events in the story as undecidable, intentionally shifting the burden of 'truth-making' to his audience. .

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<sup>170</sup> Hanna, Monica. " 'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Callaloo* 33.2 (2010): 498-520.

<sup>171</sup> Miller, T.S. "Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Science Fiction Studies* 38.1 (2011): 92-114.

<sup>172</sup> Danticat, Edgwick. "Junot Diaz." *BOMB* 101 (2007): 89-95.

. . we are left to fill in that great gap between the author and ourselves” (100).<sup>173</sup>From the perspective of this reading, it becomes quite difficult to determine the actual cause for the Fall of the House of Cabral; further uncertainty arises because of what Monica Hanna describes as Yuniór’s insistence on “emphasizing the constructed nature of all histories and narratives in general” (501), which correlates with T.S. Miller’s claim that “the novel [is] a sort of self-annotated, self-undermining text” (96). The argument here is that, since Yuniór offers various possible explanations for how and why Abelard fell out of favor with the dictator, any of which could be true, there is simply no way of making sense out of events.

One version of the story centers on an indiscrete joke that Abelard may or may not have told in front of witnesses after a night of heavy drinking; according to another version, the dictator’s wrath is aroused by rumors about a secret book. The entire matter remains essentially ambiguous; in Hanna’s words, “Yuniór never provides one single definitive answer or way to understand these stories . . . interjecting the possibility of alternative experiences and rejecting history that claims a definitive interpretation” (505). Yuniór reinforces this uncertainty when he cautions the reader, “if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it” (243).

It is important to notice, however, that at the same time that Yuniór makes it obvious that attempts at understanding inevitably involve numerous levels of indeterminacy, and that therefore totalizing truth statements are necessarily unachievable, he also implies that the reader must carefully weigh the evidence in order to interpret

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<sup>173</sup> It is important to notice the conflation here of “author” with the narrator, blurring the crucial (yet indeterminable) distinction between Díaz and Yuniór.

events plausibly. That is to say, although all histories are constructed, not all are equally believable, nor can all be regarded as having equal validity. Monica Hanna herself alludes to this conclusion when she observes that “the novel implicitly wonders if this fictional representation is not more truthful than the official history in light of all that the latter excludes” (509). Significantly, Hanna dismisses authorial agency here: it the novel that “wonders,” not an actual human person in the form of a writer who might be expressing a point of view.

Although Yuniors mentions three possible explanations for Abelard’s arrest and imprisonment, one could well argue that it is virtually certain, from a close reading of the text, as well as careful examination of the relevant historical background, that it is Abelard’s principled refusal to hand Jacquelyn over to Trujillo that precipitates his tragic downfall. Testimony about the supposed joke stems from two witnesses at the trial, one of whom is a “trusted neighbor” who shares in the spoils when Abelard’s properties are divided among Trujillo and his cronies. This witness could be none other than Marcus Applegate Roman, to whom Abelard naively confided his determination to protect his daughter (a confidence that Roman receives with ominous silence), and who is apparently amply rewarded by Trujillo for his treachery. Whether or not Abelard actually told such a joke is irrelevant in the overall context; his refusal to comply with Trujillo’s demand could easily have led to his arrest on false charges. Even if Abelard actually did tell such a joke, this fact would have been merely incidental to his primary offense, which was obviously his daring refusal to surrender Jacquelyn to be raped.

Trujillo became infamous early on in his career, starting right from the military coup by which he established absolute power in 1930, for leading a Caligula-like lifestyle

whereby he claimed the right to sexually possess literally any girl or woman residing in his domain, sealing his total control over all sectors of the Dominican population.

Richards Turits notes that, “Trujillo was notorious until his death for his incessant sexual exploitation of women, demanding lovers without regard to their wishes, whether from families of modest means in small towns or from those of important Dominican officials.

. . . The alternative to acquiescence to Trujillo was perilous.” Failure to cooperate by offering one’s wife or daughter for molestation was equivalent to treason: “Trujillo tolerated no opposition . . . his opponents and, in many cases, their relatives and associates were . . . arrested on false charges . . . [or] killed.”<sup>174</sup>

With regard to the secret book Abelard was rumored to be writing, if there was such a project, Abelard would certainly have been extremely reluctant to tell anyone about it, even Socorro, and would have taken great pains to keep the manuscript carefully hidden from his daughters and members of his household staff. Moreover, it hardly seems plausible that a dedicated scientist who conducts empirical research and publishes papers in reputable peer reviewed journals, earning international respect for his work, as Abelard does, would simultaneously devote precious time and energy to investigating superstitions about Trujillo’s so-called supernatural powers, which the entire text of *Oscar Wao* calls into question in any case. Rumors about missing manuscripts notwithstanding, it does not seem likely that Abelard spent much time speculating about the dictator’s supposed secret powers; the good doctor “wanted only to tend his wealthy,

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<sup>174</sup> Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford: Stanford U P, 2003, p. 6.

ailing patients . . . He simply didn't wish to dwell on the fates of Unfortunate People, on the goings-on in Peaksville. He didn't want those stories in his house" (226-227).

Regardless of these considerations, Daynali Flores-Rodriguez insists, without argument or citing evidence from the text, that "Yunior rejects the possibility that Abelard's fate was a consequence of his refusal to allow Trujillo easy access to her [sic] daughter," and that he opts instead for the secret book explanation. Flores-Rodriguez seems to regard historical scholarship as just one more "construction" that must be called into question, another example of how "Caribbean culture 'normalizes' dictatorial violence and oppression under the parameters established by the dictator novel genre." Paying too close attention to empirical evidence, as opposed to popular rumor, supposedly leads the reader astray: "In interpreting the Caribbean exclusively through its historiography, scholars often risk dismissing the experiences of the common folk as not worthy, effectively perpetuating elitism" (99).<sup>175</sup> It is apparently irrelevant to this assertion that Yunior describes the secret book theory as "one of those fictions with a lot of disseminators but no believers. . . . a figment of our Island's hypertrophied imagination" (246).

The only argument Yunior comes up with in favor of the secret book hypothesis is that Trujillo destroyed every trace of Abelard's work: "Not one single example of his handwriting remains. . . . You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that" (246). Yet it is just as likely that Trujillo was so enraged at having his desires flouted and his absolutist will defied that he proceeded to utterly obliterate

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<sup>175</sup> Flores-Rodriguez, Daynali. "Addressing the *Fuku* in Us: Junot Diaz and the New Novel of Dictatorship." *Antipodas* 20 (2009): 91-106.

both Abelard and his family in revenge, to erase the family completely, as if it had never existed. The circumstances surrounding the deaths of Jacquelyn and Astrid make it obvious that they were murdered: a young girl newly accepted to medical school in France does not “commit suicide” in just two feet of water at the bottom of a swimming pool, no more than stray bullets typically wander aimlessly up the center aisle of churches to pick off random innocents kneeling at the communion rail. Given the context, Estaban’s stabbing death ought to be greeted with similar suspicion. Eric Roorda recounts an anecdote that reveals just how vindictive the historical Rafael Trujillo could be; a certain Dominican official, by the name of Oscar Michelana, “ran afoul of Trujillo, leading to his torture and incarceration,” because he and his wife “showed up . . . after the soup course” at one of Trujillo’s numerous dinners, a discourtesy that the dictator simply would not tolerate.<sup>176</sup> From this incident, one can imagine Trujillo’s umbrage at being denied access to Jacquelyn, especially since his desire to possess her was so well known; Abelard’s refusal to cooperate clearly constituted both a humiliating public embarrassment, as well as a direct challenge to the Jefe’s supreme will. Trujillo would have needed to make an extreme example out of Abelard in order to discourage others from following his insubordinate example.

Lauren Derby points out that sexual exploitation served to reinforce Trujillo’s sense of absolute control over the country he ruled, and to support his preference for appearing to possess occult omnipotence: “Trujillo’s power and charisma were based on the consumption of women (and their status) through sexual conquest as well as the

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<sup>176</sup> Roorda, Eric Paul. *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945*. Durham: Duke U P, 1998, p. 162.

domination of enemies of the state, and on the near mythological fear and resultant aura he acquired through eliminating men” (111).<sup>177</sup> Derby provides compelling context for reasoning that Trujillo’s violent erasure of Abelard and his family might well have stemmed from deep-seated resentment as well as outrage over having his wishes defied. Possessing the female members of upper class families like Abelard’s was crucial to Trujillo’s hegemony and sense of personal identity, for it:

involved a performance of masculinity drawing on the popular antihero from the barrio -- the tiguere . . . or quintessential Dominican underdog who gains power, prestige, and social status through a combination of extra-institutional wits, force of will, sartorial style, and *cojones*. . . . His defining feature is a daring willingness to go after whatever he wants -- money, commodities, or women, particularly those beyond his social reach. . . . Rejected by the traditional white elite as a ruthless mulatto arriviste with Haitian (black) lineage, Trujillo sought out the offspring of the bourgeoisie in his erotic forays. Not only did he seek to defy the aristocracy by stealing their daughters, but, in true tiguere fashion, he also legitimated himself through the acquisition of women of superior status.

(114-115)

Abelard, with his pale complexion, advanced education, elite social standing, extensive business interests, horse stables occupied by Berbers “with skin like vellum” (112), all the while contentedly dining on flatware from Beleek, represented everything to

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<sup>177</sup> Derby, Lauren. *The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009.

which Trujillo needed to prove himself superior; an attractive daughter like Jacquelyn in the bargain clearly made Abelard a prime target. Daynali Flores-Rodriguez argues that in Diaz's novel, "Trujillo is dispossessed of what makes him human and becomes instead a cartoon, a two-dimensional figure reducible to pejorative monikers . . . he is never described as an individual with personal motives" (94). While it is indisputable that Trujillo's character is by no means a central focus of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, still, the pervasive influence Trujillo exerts, particularly in the case of Abelard, as well as the fate of Belicia Hypatia Cabral and her two children, argues against what Flores-Rodriguez insists is his "irrelevance to the story" (95).

Abelard's remarkable, as well as distinctly uncharacteristic, courage in defying Trujillo's supposedly omnipotent command to surrender Jacquelyn for defilement, represents a crucial challenge for understanding the central theme of the novel, which turns on his grandson Oscar's valorous return to the Dominican Republic to pursue Ybon despite the ominous threat of ignominious death that confronts him if he dares to do so. A distinct pattern of indomitable fortitude in the face of mortal danger for the sake of ensuring enduring love repeats in three succeeding generations of the Cabral family: from Abelard, through Beli, and then on to Oscar. Thus the novel portrays human love as the only possible fana for dispelling the centuries-old fuku. Since Trujillo, as the fuku's contemporary "high priest" (*Oscar Wao* 2), personifies and embodies the evil that precipitates the family's misfortunes, he can hardly be described as "irrelevant" to the Cabrals' tragic saga.

El Jefe is depicted succinctly but convincingly as displaying extremely affected, strikingly effeminate mannerisms -- an ironic juxtaposition to his preferred image of



tiaguere-like hyper masculinity: “Abelard expected him to exclaim in that high shrill voice of his, Dr. Abelard Cabral, where is that *delicious* daughter of yours? I’ve heard so much about her from your *neighbors*” (218).<sup>178</sup> The striking impression of Trujillo as a preposterously pretentious, narcissistic psychopath receives strong support from the brief description of the despot surrounded by his dotting circle of sycophantic admirers. When Abelard reassures the sarcastic tyrant that he is still married, Trujillo quips, “That is good to hear . . . I was afraid that you might have turned into *un maricon*. Then he turned to the lambesacos and laughed. Oh Jefe, they screamed, you are *too much*” (222). A threat of sinister cruelty accompanies Trujillo’s silent disdain when he realizes Abelard does not intend to comply with the command to produce Jacquelyn: “His porcine eyes narrowed. So I see, he said coldly, and then dismissed Abelard with a flick of his wrist” (233) -- yet another noticeably sissified gesture.

Trujillo’s effeminate speech and affected mannerisms stand in stark contrast to his carefully calculated display of supreme machismo, suggesting that sexual possession of females as a demonstration of masculine power and dominance has more to do with impressing other men than interacting with women, who are cynically regarded as mere objects and therefore have only incidental, symbolic significance. Yuniors alludes to Antonia Bird’s 1994 film about a Catholic priest caught between his public role as a celibate cleric and his secret life as an active homosexual in referring to this less than obvious but by no means inconsequential side of the dictatorship; like all the other attendees at numerous banquets in Trujillo’s honor, “Abelard would shake El Jefe’s hand, cover him in the warm effusion of his adoration (if you think the Trujillato was not

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<sup>178</sup> It is worth noting that Trujillo may well be referring to Marcus Applegate Roman here.

homoerotic, then, to quote the Priest, *you got another thing coming*)” (215). Yuniór, insofar as his serial relationships with women resemble Trujillo’s lecherous expropriations, steadily adds to his list of female conquests in order to impress his “boys,” who seem to be his primary social preoccupation. The latter are the ones who associate Oscar de León with Oscar Wilde, labeling him a homosexual because of his inability to secure a girlfriend. Yet Oscar is the one who ultimately achieves personal fulfillment, however fleeting, in a heterosexual relationship, while Yuniór languishes in lingering regret over losing Lola.

The historical background that Derby, Turits, and Roorda and other scholars provide, a scholarly background that Díaz clearly draws on quite extensively in both the narrative proper as well as the footnotes, suggests that Trujillo is far more forceful and devastatingly lethal a presence in the text than a mere cartoon. Flores-Rodríguez insists that, “In emphasizing the dictator’s irrelevance to the story, Yuniór also voices his discontent with specific literary and cultural traditions that do otherwise and perpetuate a singular approach to the complex problem of political oppression” (95), as if claiming that the “grand narrative” of a brutal dictator wreaking arbitrary havoc with the lives of ordinary citizens somehow requires deconstruction. If there are further layers of complexity that need to be considered regarding the nature of dictatorial oppression, perhaps it would be more fruitful to begin investigating institutional power structures that create and support autocratic rulers, and that typically remain conveniently disguised -- and thus silenced -- in conventional discourse. Trujillo, after all, is just one example among many of a type of U.S.-supported despot that is all too familiar in twentieth century history.

Flores-Rodriguez contends that Junot Diaz departs radically from the genre of the dictator novel by focusing on an overweight sci-fi nerd antihero like Oscar, yet her description of the dictator novel seems to indicate that Junot Diaz's novel actually conforms to the rule rather than proves an exception to the case:

every character asserts his or her identity in relation to the dictator, whether it is by opposing or complying with his will. Dictators become mythical and patriarchal figures who sort and hierarchise the world that surrounds them. The dictator's own role as a citizen becomes marred by concrete or ideological ties with foreign countries (most commonly the U.S.), effectively marking him as an exception to the rule of national identity. He is both a metaphor and an anomaly. The dictator novel has a strong historical background: even when the dictatorial regime is fictional, it is usually a composite of several 'real' regimes. There is a tendency in these narratives to dwell on the atrocities and eccentricities of the regime. . . there is a strong moral judgment against the figure of the dictator, who is treated as the source of all evil. Overall, the dictator novel emphasizes the person who holds the power instead of the regime that sustains it. (93)

This description calls for quoting at length because it is difficult to see how, if at all, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "departs" from the dictator convention as Flores-Rodriguez perceives it; Junot Diaz's text contains all of the elements she lists to one degree or another, except perhaps for characterizing Trujillo as the "source of *all* evil," and the emphasis on just one "person who holds the power instead of the regime which sustains it." In Diaz's novel, Joaquin Balaguer, Johnny Abbes, Felix Bernardino,

and Ramfis Trujillo all receive their fair share of credit for causing the mayhem. The Gangster and La Fea, along with the Elvises, SIMians Numero Uno and Dos, various prison guards, Gorilla Grod and Somon Grundy also play their distinctive roles in the tragic drama. Ultimately, the regime that sustains Latin American tyrants like Trujillo is clearly the one in Washington, D.C., which Diaz is careful to emphasize, although critics like Flores-Rodriguez seem to prefer to overlook this crucial fact, scarcely mentioning it. Flores-Rodriguez refers to Diaz's criticisms of Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* in his interview with Edwidge Danticat, and also to the frequently cited footnote about dictators and writers on page ninety-seven of *Oscar Wao*, while asserting that Diaz "broadens the problematic inheritance of dictatorial regimes and their representation by alluding to multiple contexts and discursive practices" (96). Yet if anything, Diaz expands the discussion by incorporating context that Vargas Llosa, as well as Flores-Rodriguez and numerous other critics, tend to ignore -- the crucial role played by the United States government, and by U.S financial/corporate elites, in supporting dictatorships world-wide, which definitely broadens the "problematic" beyond merely "Caribbean culture."

Yunior makes it clear that Trujillo's control over the Dominican Republic was completely inescapable, observing wryly:

not only did he lock the country away from the rest of the world . . . he acted like it was his very own plantation, acted like he owned everything and everyone, killed whomever he wanted to kill, sons, brothers, fathers, mothers, took women away from their husbands on their wedding nights and then would brag publicly about 'the great honeymoon' he'd had the

night before. His Eye was everywhere; he had Secret Police that out-Stasi'd the Stasi, that kept watch on everyone . . . It was widely believed that at any one time between forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police's payroll. Your own fucking neighbors could acabar con you just because you cut in front of them at the colmado. Mad folks went out in that manner, betrayed by those they considered their panas, by members of their own families, by slips of the tongue. (225-226)

Under Trujillo, generalized fear and suspicion destroyed any sense of community, along with Dominicans' natural feelings of sympathy and solidarity. Lauren Derby confirms Yuniors' description of Trujillo's Iron Curtain-style domestic spy and internal surveillance system:

the dramatic expansion and deprofessionalization of the military and police under Trujillo contributed to levels of violent, if sporadic, excess, such as the use of arbitrary incarceration and torture . . . everyday life during the Trujillato was characterized by pervasive insecurity and atomization as an ever-expanding apparatus of espionage developed . . . the culture of terror was deep and pervasive . . . [and] spread throughout society. (139-141)

Citizens of all classes lived in a constant state of anxiety, never knowing who might denounce them, or for what reason: "The secrecy surrounding the authorship of accusations . . . amplified the fear, as the circulation of rumors echoed and amplified the perceived circuits of power" (139-141).

It becomes clear from examining historical scholarship that the novel's characterizations of Trujillo and the extent of his control over the Dominican Republic are not simply Yuniors' "constructions;" it also seems unwarranted to suggest that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* departs significantly from dictator novel conventions, or to insist that the text somehow consistently "undermines" itself when there exists such a close correlation between the fictional narrative and the findings of historical research. It is a mere truism to say that all historical accounts are "constructed;" what is crucial for understanding is that some historical -- as well as fictional -- accounts are more accurately constructed than others. It is simply not valid to assert, as Maria Cristina Rodriguez claims, that in "these post-postmodern times . . . history is no longer factual documentation; instead, it is composed of events that are nurtured by everyone and everything. . . . [there is] no distinction between history and story, between real and imagined, between facts and events" (55).<sup>179</sup>

While history as an academic discipline certainly requires the construction of narratives, still, scholarly texts need to be responsibly based on ascertainable facts as well as constrained by verifiable information. History can never be just whatever anyone simply imagines, makes up, or prefers to believe. Diaz's novel, of course, is by no means a work of historical scholarship, but the story relies on reputable scholarship as necessary background. Junot Diaz leaves interpretation of the meaning of his novel up to the individual reader to decide, indeed, but with the implicit understanding that readers will

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<sup>179</sup> Rodriguez, Maria Cristina. "Political Authority Figures as Distant Memories of a Forgotten Past: Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salome*." *Journal of Caribbean Literature* 6.2 (2009): 55-63.

make every effort to assess the available historical evidence, and not simply rely on theoretical speculation or popular rumor as lenses for evaluating the Cabrals' tragic saga.

Yunior observes that under the fearful gaze of The Eye, "Shit was so tight that many people actually believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers! It was whispered that he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away, that he was protected by the most evil fuku on the Island" (226). Given the general paranoia of the times, it is understandable that ordinary Dominican citizens indulged in such superstitious thinking, letting their imaginations run wild, yet such fantasies convey no more significance than blaming indigestion from last night's shrimp on bad thoughts about Trujillo (*Oscar Wao* 3). Despite ample evidence in the novel that points to human agency as the main cause of people's suffering and misery, critics nevertheless focus on some vague occult power as the source of pervasive misfortune. Juanita Heredia explains that "the fuku [is] a symbol of bad luck that still lives in the daily lives of . . . Oscar and his family members in the twentieth century" (212), so that Oscar, in the end, is "struck by the curse of the fuku" (218).<sup>180</sup> Monica Hanna perceives the fuku in terms of Gabriel Marcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, regarding it as a "cyclical" malady that affects "successive generations, each ignorant of the history of its ancestors . . . doomed to re-live the violence and evil of the family's curse" (500). Ignacio Lopez-Calvo refers to Diaz's "unacknowledged debt with Magical Realism," and categorizes the fuku as the "curse that has damned [Oscar's] family for generations" (75); Lopez-Calvo lumps the fuku together with:

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<sup>180</sup> Heredia, Juanita. "The Dominican Diaspora Strikes Back: Cultural Archive and Race in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration: Narratives of Displacement*. Ed. Vanessa Perez Rosario. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

the tropical exoticism, the hyper-violence and sensualism, the cult of Third World underdevelopment, the incorporation of superstitions, mythical legends, and popular folklore, the typical ‘special effects’ of magical realism (where ‘magical’ or illogical elements appear in apparently normal circumstances and characters accept instead of questioning them). (86)<sup>181</sup>

Yet Diaz emphasizes that the fuku he is talking about is an evil that is far more powerful, and real, as well as systemic and pervasive than just a popular superstition or a mysterious curse that afflicts a single family; the fuku that permeates the pages of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* represents a hemispheric (and even a global) malady, an exceptionally malevolent force, one driven by ruthless cruelty and utterly unscrupulous avarice that has persisted for centuries, and that has been and continues to be responsible for the violent deaths and unimaginable suffering of countless millions of human beings. Lopez-Calvo minimizes the significance of the fuku that Junot Diaz is describing by reducing it to generic “special effects,” totalizing the concept of “Magical Realism” in a way that does not at all correspond with its complex literary manifestations, which include the work of writers as various as Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Miguel Asturias, Augusto Roa Bastos, Gabriel Marcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Derek Wolcott. Defining the term categorically, as Lopez-Calvo presumes to do, unduly restricts the richness and scope that it is actually intended to encompass. Moreover, as Erik Camayd-Freixas points out, magical realism

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<sup>181</sup> Lopez-Calvo, Ignacio. “A Postmodern Platano’s Trujillo: Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, more Macondo than McCondo.” *Antipodas* 20 (2009): 75-90. Although Third World underdevelopment is a well-documented fact, Lopez prefers to reduce it to a mere “cult” -- the equivalent of voodoo.



should properly be regarded as an international -- as opposed to strictly Latin American -- literary phenomenon.<sup>182</sup>

Daniel Bautista concurs with Lopez-Calvo's reductive assessment, claiming that " 'fuku' [is just] a traditional Dominican curse of supernatural bad luck that would fit comfortably in any Garcia Marquez story" (41).<sup>183</sup> Bautista also agrees with T.S. Miller's insistence that the ontological status of the fuku remains contested:

Diaz's novel repeatedly treats the true existence of fuku as an open question. Despite numerous clues and suggestions, the reality of the fuku remains rather vague; it is never absolutely clear where the fuku comes from, how it operates, who exactly is cursed, or who has done the cursing and why. Indeed, the notion of what the fuku is responsible for is sometimes so amorphous and diffuse that it becomes comic in its triviality . . . [for example] the cramps caused by a bad meal of shrimp." Such examples "are so petty and silly that they strongly suggest that the belief in fuku is really just a superstition, a grasping at supernatural explanations for what are really just unfortunate coincidences. (48)

Bautista fails to account for the dual sense in which the fuku is understood in the novel; Diaz refers on the very first page to "both kinds of fuku, little and large." On one level, as with a bad case of indigestion, the fuku is, in fact, mere popular superstition, like rumors of El Jefe's secret powers; in another sense, however, the fuku as Diaz portrays it is quite real, as well as devastatingly dangerous. It is a "demon drawn into Creation

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<sup>182</sup> Camayd-Freixas, Erik. "Reflections on *Magical Realism: A Return to Legitimacy, the Legitimacy of Return.*" *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (1996): 580-589, p. 582.

<sup>183</sup> Bautista, Daniel. "Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.*" *Journal of the Fantastic Arts* 21.1 (2010): 41-53.

through the nightmare door that cracked open in the Antilles . . . the Curse and Doom of the New World . . . unleashed [by] the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola” (1). Its source as well as the identity of its victims is clearly explicated: “the Europeans were the original fuku, no stopping them. Massacre after massacre after massacre” (footnote #29, p. 244). The Europeans’ cruel reply to Anacoana’s impassioned appeal, “Let us build a bridge of love,” sums up the fuku pretty succinctly. Trujillo’s vindictiveness toward the Cabrals, likewise, should be regarded as more than just another “unfortunate coincidence.”

From the opening pages of the novel, it becomes obvious that the fuku cannot be simply dismissed as some vague “ancient, almost mythical” curse, as Hanna maintains, nor is it accurate to say that “the origins of the fuku are mysterious” (502). Diaz makes it clear that the pervasive evil associated with the fuku arrived in the New World with Columbus, and that the fuku is not an occult force at all, but instead represents the persisting legacy of European avarice and rapine. Trujillo, who “treated the country like it was a plantation,” descended from this same imperial tradition, inheriting the conquistadors’ brutal power, and wielding it “through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror” (footnote #1, p.2). As a poor peasant, Trujillo just another nameless victim, but as a favorite of his U.S. Marine trainers, he quickly became the Curse’s “master . . . it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (3). Thanks to enthusiastic support from politicians and business elites observing approvingly from Washington, Trujillo quickly achieved the status of the fuku’s designated “high priest” (2). The Curse that was introduced into the New World by Columbus, then perpetuated by El Jefe, and

subsequently amplified by Demon Balaguer, is a far more substantial phenomenon than mere idle superstition. It would not be any more accurate to attribute the terror exercised by Trujillo to mysterious supernatural forces than it would be to do so in the case of Pinochet, Suharto, or the Shah of Iran.

The fuku describes an all-encompassing geopolitical system; every member of global society, at every level, knowingly or unknowingly, is caught up and trapped, in one way or another, in the deadly web of its comprehensive framework. As Ngugi pointedly observes, “There is no area of our lives including the very boundaries of our imaginations which is not affected by the way that society is organized, by the whole operation and machinery of power: how and by whom that power has been achieved; which class controls and maintains it; and the ends to which power is put” (476).<sup>184</sup>

Western intellectuals typically prefer to ignore, and thus refuse to take responsibility for, the unprecedented genocide and brutally savage slave system that served as correlative foundations of Western civilization’s current opulence, but the horrors of past injustices remain very much alive, as well as all too real, for the fuku’s contemporary victims, who retain painful memories of murdered ancestors even as they continue to suffer from the exacerbating consequences of ongoing neoliberal exploitation. Junot Diaz warns, “one day there will be a reckoning;” Yunion cautions readers at the very outset of his narrative: “we are all its children, whether we know it or not. . . . It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine -- it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fuku believes in you” (2, 5).

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<sup>184</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’O. “Writers in Politics: The Power of Words and the Words of Power.” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2007): 476-483.

A close reading of the novel reveals straightforward suggestions for dispelling the fuku and counteracting its malicious effects. As Yuniór points out, under the subheading “Fuku Vs. Zafa,” rather than cursed, the fact that she survives the beating in the cane field shows “that our Beli was blessed.” La Inca, in retrospect, agrees with this assessment: “To her dying day she believed that Beli had met not a curse but God in that canefield,” a conclusion Beli seems to share: “I met something, Beli would say, guardedly.” Crucially, the protective power of Beli’s blessing emanates from within the depths of her own being. Beli has suffered abandonment by family members as well as severe abuse by strangers, who exploit her as a child slave; this early desolation revisits her during the nearly fatal beating: “there yawned a loneliness so total it was beyond death, a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she’d not even had her own name.” Beli, however, has always fought back ferociously against hostile fate, and her instinctive sense of rebellion against injustice comes to her rescue in the cane field as well:

Just as our girl was set to disappear across that event horizon, just as the cold of obliteration was stealing up her legs, she found in herself one last reservoir of strength . . . all she had to do was realize once again that she’d been tricked, once again she’d been *played* . . . so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her life.

(148)

For someone like Beli, who has been so drastically deprived of nourishing support and affection from the earliest moments of life, the pursuit and attainment of love assumes crucial as well as primary importance:

Beli had longed, hungered, for a chance to be *in* love and to be loved back . . . never had the opportunity in her first lost childhood; and in the intervening years her desire for it had doubled over and doubled over like a katana being forged until it was finally sharper than the truth. . . she, the daughter of the Fall, recipient of its heaviest radiations, loved atomically. (127)

Beli is desperate to experience physical intimacy, which explains why she is so naïve and gullible, and falls so easily and completely for the Gangster; she is also fully capable of reciprocity, as is evident from the generous affection that she lavishes on him in return for his solicitous attention.

Beli's love for the child she is carrying transforms her fear of the violence being inflicted on her in the cane field into defiance:

She cried out each time they struck her but she did not cry . . . She would not give them the pleasure. There was such fear . . . Such fear, and yet she refused to show it . . . Anyone else would have turned her face from the blows, but Beli offered hers up. And between punches she brought up her knees to comfort her stomach. You'll be OK, she whispered through a broken mouth. You'll live. (146)

Beli's only thoughts are for her unborn child: "she kept flinging her head to get her hair out of her face, could only think about her poor little boy, and that was the sole reason she started to weep" (147). The passionate devotion she feels for her children who are yet to come -- "*The ones who await*" (149) -- provides further impetus that enables her to survive: "Each time she thought she would fall she concentrated on the faces of her

promised future -- her promised children -- and from that obtained the strength she needed to continue. She pulled from strength, from hope, from hate, from her invincible heart, each a different piston driving her forward” (150). Love constitutes the sole purpose and meaning of Beli’s existence; affection is the spiritual engine that enables her survival. Beli bequeaths this indomitable life force of all consuming affection to Lola and Oscar: “pure uncut unadulterated love, the Holy Grail that would so bedevil her children throughout their lives” (125-126).

Despite being a hopelessly overweight ghetto nerd, young Oscar:

was still the passionate enamorado who fell in love easily and deeply. He had secret loves all over town . . . girls . . . about whom he could not stop dreaming. His affection -- that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity without regard to looks, age, or availability -- broke his heart each and every day. (23)

When Oscar suspects danger threatening his dream girl Ana Obregon, he displays the same kind of reckless bravado he later demonstrates with Ybon, waiting outside Manny’s apartment all night with his uncle’s revolver: “He didn’t care that he would more than likely be put away forever” if he got caught by the police. “I’ve waited forever to be in love, he wrote his sister. . . . It’s like I swallowed a piece of heaven . . . You can’t imagine how it feels” (47).

The powerful bond of loyalty and affection that connects Beli and her children, as well as Lola and Oscar to each other, can be regarded as a family legacy, a love force far more potent than any spooky fuku. This genealogical magis manifests initially in

Abelard's fierce devotion to his daughters; as the threat of Trujillo looms nearer, Abelard becomes increasingly anxious and agitated: "He couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, paced the halls of their house all night long . . . Every chance he got he spent with his daughters. . . . On the afternoon of the party . . . he caught sight of [Jacquelyn] . . . looking absolutely divine, absolutely young . . . He just knew. Knew he just couldn't do it" (230, 232).

La Inca generously dispenses this nourishing family magic in her turn, rescuing nine year-old Beli from utter misery after a prolonged, arduous search, patiently raising her as her own daughter; La Inca later assures Lola that she and Oscar represent a precious gift of love that dispels the evil consequences of Beli's terrible experience in the cane field, and all that their mother suffered up until the time of their birth: "it all turned out for the best . . . We have you and your brother and that's more than anyone could have hoped for, given what came before" (75). While it is undoubtedly true that Beli often treats her children quite harshly, and that her relationship with them, as Juanita Heredia points out, "is marred with ideas of power, violence and oppression" that "calls our attention to the ways in which the power dynamics of dictatorial regimes are articulated in private" (100-101), nevertheless, her love for both of them is unconditional and uncompromising. Beli expresses ferocity much more readily than she does affection - which is not all that surprising, given the egregious emotional and physical abuse she has endured -- but her total devotion to her children is unmistakable; she blurts out her strangled feelings to Lola over the phone at La Inca's, "Just know that I would die for you, she told me the last time we talked. And before I could say anything she hung up" (72).

Yunior expresses pointed skepticism about there being any mysterious or supernatural source for the fuku in his comment about the unborn child killed during the cane field beating: “The world is full of tragedies enough without niggers having to resort to curses for explanations” (152), inferring that the cruelty of the Trujillato is obviously to blame. Lola also reveals a skeptical attitude regarding vague notions of any family fuku: “If you ask me I don’t think there is any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That’s enough” (205). Lola can bear personal witness to the human role in causing suffering as a result of being sexually molested at the age of eight by an older family acquaintance, as well as being forced to witness her mother heroically struggling to hold down two jobs while being eaten alive by cancer in order to keep a roof over her children’s heads. Allusions to New Jersey’s infamous industrial pollution suggest that Beli’s disease may also derive from human activity rather than just a malicious fate. Lola recalls that when she set her mother’s wig on fire, the “smell was horrible, like all the chemicals from all the factories in Elizabeth” (59), the city that Yunior observes “is what New Jersey is *really* known for, industrial wastes on both sides of the turnpike” (39).<sup>185</sup>

Near the end of her life, Beli draws bitter conclusions about the various causes of her personal suffering that likewise seem to have nothing to do with any kind of fuku: “as she broke it down to Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto*, she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America” (113). La Inca understands that Beli’s escape from Trujillo’s island prison is no

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<sup>185</sup> In “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,” the narrator advises, with droll irony: “when you’re both finished eating walk back into the neighborhood. The skies will be magnificent. Pollutants have made Jersey sunsets one of the wonders of the world. Point it out. Touch her shoulder and say That’s nice, right?” (*Drown* 147).



cause for celebration since the young woman is now headed for the so-called fuku's headquarters in the United States:

Exile to the North! . . . who knows what might happen to the girl among the yanquis? In her mind the U.S. was nothing more and nothing less than a pais overrun by gangsters, putas, and no-accounts. Its cities swarmed with machines and industry, as thick with sinvergueneria as Santo Domingo was with heat, a cuco shod in iron, exhaling fumes, with the glittering promise of coin deep in the cold lightless shaft of its eyes. (158)

This "glittering promise of coin" represents the updated version of the same ruthless greed for endless wealth that first brought the fuku to the New World, and that inspired the conquistadors to conduct the original genocide. Yuni6r indicates the pervasiveness of La Inca's perception among Dominican immigrants when he observes in "Invierno" that "Everyone had warned his mother that the U.S. was a difficult place where even the Devil got his ass beat."<sup>186</sup>

Oscar initially attributes his despair over Jenni Munoz and his subsequent suicide attempt to a family fuku when he explains to Yuni6r, "It was the curse that made me do it, you know" (194), and he is tempted to do the same again after he is nearly beaten to death in the cane field by Grod and Grundy: "it dawned on him that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be *true*" (303).<sup>187</sup> But after reflecting on his forced separation from the woman he loves, Oscar abruptly changes his attitude to one of

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<sup>186</sup> *This Is How You Lose Her*, p. 138.

<sup>187</sup> It is interesting to note that the wording here is quite similar to the expression used in commenting about the possible existence of Abelard's secret manuscript: "A book about the Dark Powers of the President . . . in which he argued that he was supernatural . . . may in some ways have been *true*" (245). The emphasis on the word true in each case may be read to suggest 'hypertrophied imagination.'

open defiance: “Fuku. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you.*” He immediately makes up his mind that nothing is going to stand between him and Ybon; he staggers to the window, and boldly announces his intentions for all the world -- including the capitan -- to hear: “I love you, he shouted into the street. I love you!” (304). This romantic gesture recalls Oscar’s exuberant declamations outside La Inca’s house when he was a small boy: “The little guy loved himself the females, had ‘girlfriends’ galore. . . . In the DR during summer visits to his family digs in Bani he was the worst, would stand in front of Nena Inca’s house and call out to passing women -- Tu eres guapa! Tu eres guapa!” (12-13).

After he is finally forced to return to New Jersey, Oscar responds to Yunior’s shocked dismay at seeing his badly mangled face by proclaiming, “Bigger game afoot than my appearance[s]. He wrote the word out for me: *fuku*” (306). Oscar is now hunting his own fear, not some mysterious curse; fear is the “game,” the prized trophy he must bag -- even if it costs him his life -- if he hopes to debunk the idea of the fuku. The reference to “game” here is the only explicit allusion in the novel, apart from the title, to Hemingway’s “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and highlights the sharp contrast from that story to the type of courage that Oscar gradually attains. The moment of transformation within Francis Macomber is brought about by circumstances, including his humiliation over his cowardly display the previous day, as well as his rage at his wife’s brazen infidelity. Wilson describes this unexpected change as “a sudden precipitation into action without opportunity for worrying beforehand,” similar to soldiers’ unexpected awakening of bravery on a battlefield. Macomber’s newfound sense of courage defines him as a man, setting him apart from and in opposition to his female

partner: “More of a change than any loss of virginity. Fear gone like an operation. Something else grew in its place. Main thing a man had. Made him into a man. Women knew it too. No bloody fear” (132).<sup>188</sup>

The transformation within Oscar, in contrast, enables him to finally achieve union with the woman he loves, rather than setting him apart from or in opposition to her. His relationship with Ybon is marked by tender solicitation, along with a sense of closeness that goes far beyond just sexual consummation:

what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex -- it was the little intimacies that he'd never his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck. The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a little girl and him telling her that he'd been a virgin all his life; (334-335)

these quotidian pleasures and satisfactions are what Oscar refers to in the final words of the novel as “The beauty! The beauty!” (334-335).

Moreover, for Oscar, mastering his fear does not occur all at once, as it does for Macomber, nor is it accompanied by a sense of reckless elation; instead, achieving adequate courage to return to the Island and face the capitan entails a prolonged, agonizing struggle that requires both painful deliberation as well as fully determined resolution. When Grod and Grundy leave him alone in the car to go purchase flashlight

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<sup>188</sup> Hemingway, Ernest. “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The First Forty-Nine Stories and the Play The Fifth Column*. New York: Modern Library, 1938.

batteries, Oscar understands that “Fear is the mind killer . . . but he couldn’t force himself to act” (297-298). As he is led into the cane field, Oscar finds himself “so bewildered and frightened he pissed himself. . . How could this be happening? . . . he was so very afraid . . . and started crying” (296-297). Even when Oscar finally sees Ybon again, after mustering the necessary bravery to fly back to Santo Domingo, “His heart seized like a bad leg and for a moment he thought about letting the whole thing go, about returning to Bosco and getting on with his miserable life” (315), but his determination to find love proves stronger than his fear of death. His “miserable life” brings only black fits of depression and despairing thoughts of suicide; in New Jersey, Oscar “knew exactly what he was turning into . . . the worst kind of human on the planet: an old bitter dork” (268).

Like his grandfather, who risks his life by taking a stand against Trujillo, Oscar decides to defy the capitan, regardless of the terrible cost to himself. Daynali Flores-Rodriguez maintains that “Junot Diaz warns us against the shock value of graphic violence, which is used to convey reality but does not often consider the ethical dilemmas and personal choices at work when rejecting violence” (104). What is missing from this analysis is consideration of the ethical challenge involved in deliberately risking brutal violence for the sake of a moral principle, which is what Oscar must bring himself to do. Oscar understands that the capitan has no right to interfere in the love that he and Ybon feel for each other, but he is also fully aware of the awful price he will be forced to pay if he dares to return to the Island to be near her:

He was a complete and utter wreck. Knew he loved her like he’d never loved anyone. . . . Fuck the capitan. Fuck Grod and Grundy. . . . Easy to say in the rational day but at night his balls turned to ice water and ran

down his fucking legs like piss. Dreamed again and again and again of the cane, the terrible cane, except now it wasn't him at the receiving end of the beating, but his sister, his mother, heard them shrieking, begging for them to stop, please God *stop*, but instead of racing toward the voices, he *ran away!* Woke up *screaming. Not me. Not me.* (306)

The inclusion of Lola and Beli in Oscar's nightmare, along with the fact that his mother and sister are the ones receiving the beating that he fears for himself, correlates with the dream where the Mongoose asks Oscar if he wants to choose "More or less?" The inference is clear: if Oscar chooses "less" -- that is, if he decides to avoid danger by refraining from attempting to see Ybon again -- he will avoid further personal suffering. But protecting himself like this would be a selfish act, for it amounts to allowing the capitan, and people like him -- as well as the fuku -- to rule, leaving others whom he loves at continuing risk: "for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain -- Less! Less! Less! -- but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. Lola and his mother and Nena Inca. . . . More, he croaked." The Mongoose's response to Oscar's decision is enigmatic: "\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_, says the Mongoose" (301). Yet the missing words here could well be, "So be it"; apparently, Diaz/Yunior leaves this riddle, like so much else, for the reader to decide.

Oscar the idealist, the love-starved, romantic dreamer who has spent his life fantasizing about dramatically rescuing damsels in distress, beginning with Ana Obregon and Lola's track team sisters, understands that petty tyrants like the capitan rely on violence and fear to prevent other human beings from realizing their innate right to love and be loved, to interrelate and share in just and harmonious community, to practice the

instinctive ethical principles that inform all peoples intuitively. Oscar connects existentially with his mother's terrible beating in a similar cane field years before he was even born: "the world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago" (298). Referring to her sparsely furnished house, Ybon advised Oscar to "travel light," as "She extended her arms to embrace . . . maybe the whole world," and that seems to be exactly what Oscar feels he is doing when he embraces Ybon. Oscar has struggled and suffered ever since he was a small boy, yearning for the opportunity to experience love, and now that he has finally been given a chance at last, he is determined that nothing can be allowed to stand in his way.

Filling in the blank spaces in this instance, like the act of writing itself, correlates with the theme of filling in the *paginas en blanco* that repeats throughout the text, reinforcing the idea that it is not predetermined fate, or some mysterious, inescapable *fuku*, but human choice that ultimately determines the direction and eventual outcome of an individual's life. A similar instance of blank spaces in place of missing words occurs near the end of the novel; Yunion regrets losing his chance to form a permanent bond with Lola: "Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we could be in bed together like the old times . . . and I'd finally try to say words that could have saved us. \_\_\_\_\_ (327). It does not seem difficult to imagine what these three missing words might be: a simple "I love you" would fit nicely.

Oscar fills in the *paginas en blanco* of his life by creating an alternative to simply surrendering to despair; he conjures a counter spell that erases the *fuku* that haunts his family and that generates so much pervasive human misery generally, to the point of

threatening ultimate species apocalypse. If the fuku, in fact, derives from malicious individuals such as Trujillo and the capitan, who consciously choose to harm others in order to satisfy their lust for power, and not some irresistible supernatural malevolence that is outside and independent from all human agency and control, then alternative human choices, such as those that elevate love over hate, as well as generosity and selflessness over avarice and ruthless greed, could conceivably create the conditions for realizing a “Stronger Loving World” (331), as Oscar dreams. Such a world would necessarily include alternative forms of socio-economic organization, based on ethical values such as those articulated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Obviously, it is one thing to idly speculate about such a possibility, and quite another to demonstrate how such a fana might actually work in practice. Yet this is exactly what Oscar strives to accomplish, on a microcosmic, strictly personal level.

After his failed suicide attempt and subsequent prolonged depression, Oscar gradually begins to emerge from the depths of his despair; he renews his dedication to pursuing the same lifelong dream that had inspired and sustained his mother: “Beli at thirteen believed in love like a seventy year-old widow who’s been abandoned by family, husband, children, and fortune believes in God” (88). Finding love, for Beli, is a matter of survival, and her singular capacity for mustering extraordinary courage for the sake of love seems to run in the family. Abelard is not even close to the fighter his third daughter turns out to be; nevertheless, he remains stalwart, bravely determined to protect Jacquelyn from the lascivious clutches of the Goat, no matter the dire cost to himself. Oscar shows similar dogged determination throughout his short life as the ghetto nerd fat boy who just cannot make it with the girls. He calmly ignores the steady stream of insults

with which he is bombarded daily in the neighborhood and at Don Bosco, valiantly refusing to relinquish his quest for intimate affection. He astonishes Lola (and exasperates Yunion, the self-styled champion lady player) with his uncanny ability to attract sustained attention from stunning females such as Ana Obregon and Jenni Munoz (“La Jablesse”); his discovery of Jenni’s fling with another boy sends him into an uncharacteristic rage before it precipitates his near-fatal jump from the railroad overpass. Yet Oscar’s desire for affection proves indomitable; he gradually rallies his forces, impressing Yunion with a new diet and exercise program that finally begins removing some of his self-defeating excess weight.

In Ybon, Oscar discovers yet another attractive (if slightly faded) female who feels instinctively drawn to the courteous sensitivity and polite consideration that Oscar invariably shows toward all desirable girls and women -- and toward everyone else, for that matter. When Ybon stops at his table to ask what he’s reading, creating a space, Yunion advises us, “where miracles begin” (280), Oscar is immediately stricken, and becomes hopelessly, irrevocably enamored: “Oscar considered her the start of his real life” (279). Significantly, Ybon is a chabine, like the magical figure who rescues Beli from imminent death in the cane field. Although Ybon’s choice of profession causes Oscar obvious pain, he accepts her unequivocally and adores her as if she were the Virgen de la Altagracia, to the horrified dismay of his mother and aunt. Conventional contempt and disdain for prostitutes is irrelevant to Oscar; in his desperation, he is more than happy to accept love wherever he can find it. Oscar sees beyond public disapproval into the depths of Ybon’s person, where he discovers another lost soul just as isolated and lonely as his own: “You could tell she hadn’t had anyone to talk to in a long time” (281).



From the perspective of the typical metaphorical lens through which Oscar consistently perceives his life, Ybon becomes instantly transformed from an aging prostitute into a “marooned alien princess” (282) whom he is destined to rescue. Ybon represents a last ditch chance for attainment of Oscar’s lifelong goal: “This is it, he told himself. His chance to win” (283), his final opportunity to grasp the Holy Grail, the “uncut unadulterated love” of his mother’s vision.

When Oscar falls head-over-heels in love with Ybon, he becomes completely transformed; he feels literally reborn: “The gates of his heart had swung open and he felt light on his feet, he felt weightless, he felt lithe” (286). He rushes to his stranded princess’s rescue, hopping on his imaginary “rocketship, the Hijo de Sacrificio” (291) and never looks back. Confronted by the capitan, Oscar comprehends his grave peril at once: “When Oscar saw the capitan’s eyes he knew he was in deep shit.” Yet he stubbornly insists on exacerbating the danger he is facing by repeatedly referring to this sadist as Ybon’s “ex-boyfriend,” even after the capitan begins pummeling him. While sitting tightly wedged between Grod and Grundy in the backseat, Oscar sees the capitan dragging Ybon out of the Pathfinder by her hair, and valiantly attempts to rush to her rescue, even though his effort is surely doomed to failure: “He tried to jump out of the car but Gorilla Grod elbowed him so hard that all the fight jumped clean out of him” (295-296). In the cane field, Oscar finds himself following in his mother’s footsteps, enduring, as she did, a “beating to end all beatings,” the kind of brutality that Diaz insists is quite familiar to Dominican immigrants living in the U.S. as well: “It was . . . a beating so cruel and relentless that even Camden, the City of the Ultimate Beatdown, would have been proud. (Yes sir, nothing like getting smashed in the face with those patented

Pachmayr [pistol handle] Presentation Grips” so popular with New Jersey law enforcement officers” (298-299).

Significantly, Oscar imagines that he is being beaten by three men, not just two. Just as his mother did before him, Oscar perceives a faceless man sitting in a rocking chair along the roadside as he is being driven to the cane field; this same faceless man now seems to be joining in on the horrific assault (298-299). References to The Man with No Face pervade the text; the faceless man can be regarded as a symbol of amoral malevolence, an anonymous personification of Galactus, who regards “brief, nameless lives” as utterly worthless, and thus entirely expendable. The faceless man represents impersonal death, enabled by the total collapse of all moral and ethical paradigms; he is the blank face of the fuku. But the faceless man has no power in the cane field, for Oscar, like his mother before him, miraculously survives. In yet another striking manifestation of the power of ordinary human affection, loyal, devoted Clives finds Oscar in time; if he had ceased looking around in the darkness and waited for daylight, Oscar would probably have died from his terrible injuries.

Oscar’s dream about his mother and sister signifies an existential basis for instinctive human solidarity; Oscar intuitively perceives that the captain’s brutality threatens not only him, but his entire family, and, by inference, the entire human family as well. His shame at giving in to sheer terror and running away in his dream, instead of attempting to defend his mother and sister, reflects an intuitive understanding that he has a responsibility to protect the people he loves. Oscar ponders anew the theme of an all-time favorite anime, *Virus*, re-reads *The Lord of the Ring* yet again -- “one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts” -- and then grimly resolves to carry on with dogged pursuit

of his Holy Grail, regardless of the catastrophic consequences he is sure to bring down on himself. Oscar realizes that he must overcome his paralyzing fear and face the danger head-on if he ever hopes to create a counter spell for the evil curse that threatens him, and Lola, Beli, and Ybon, as well as all the other victims of the fuku, past, present, and future. When he dreams of the cane field beating again, this time, “instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened” (307).

Oscar decides that it is his responsibility to pay attention to the suffering of others, and to intercede on their behalf any way that he can. Oscar’s resolution creates a sense of purpose, an inner calm and dignity he has never experienced before. Visiting Yunion to solicit funds for a plane ticket back to Santo Domingo, Oscar “looked like a man at peace with himself . . . You should have seen him. He was so thin, had lost all the weight and was still, still” (312). The repetition of “still” here evokes the dignified silence and serenity of Christ before Pilate, as do the frequent allusions to Aslan, who offers himself up in sacrifice to save the creatures of Narnia in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.<sup>189</sup> Allusions to Christ’s crucifixion also resonate in the constant repetition of the motif “three days” throughout the text, referring to the lapse of time between Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection three days later, a notion explicitly referred to in Yunion’s description of La Inca’s prayer vigil for Beli: “To exhaustion and beyond they prayed, to that glittering place where flesh dies and is born

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<sup>189</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

again” (145).<sup>190</sup> Oscar’s spirit of selfless sacrifice follows in the tradition of La Inca’s strenuous efforts on behalf of Beli:

Everybody in the neighborhood will tell you how shortly after the girl slipped out of the country, La Inca began to diminish, like Galadriel after the temptation of the ring -- out of sadness for the girl’s failures, some would say, but others would point to that night of Herculean prayer. No matter what your take, it cannot be denied that after Beli’s departure La Inca’s hair began to turn snowy white, and by the time Lola lived with her she was no longer the Great Power that she had been. (155-56)

La Inca redoubles her efforts in the prayer marathon after Beli miraculously survives the cane field: “Not yet recovered from her Hail Mary play, she called upon her ancestors and upon Jesus Christo for help. . . . On the third day it came to her” (157), in the form of yet another mysterious supernatural intervention -- instructions from her dead husband in a dream; he tells her that she must send Beli to New York. After her husband’s surprising appearance, La Inca, like Abelard before her, becomes hopelessly paralyzed with indecision, so she continues to fast as well as pray, going “another three days without food” (159). When La Fea’s thugs show up at the door again looking for Beli, La Inca finally makes up her mind for good; she displays Cabral family courage at its finest by grabbing a machete and stepping outside to confront them, keeping the machete handy until she sees Beli safely off on the plane: “La Inca I don’t think slept a single day during those months . . . [she] carried a machete everywhere.” Beli, like Oscar

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<sup>190</sup> There are far too many mentions of the number three in the novel for this to be regarded as merely coincidental. Examples can be found on pages 30, 62, 145, 157, 159, 169, 178, 219, 240, 249, 270, 280, 284, 299, 302, 304, and 329.

does later, dreams of her near fatal beating, suffers “nightmares of the cane, of the Faceless One, but when she awoke from them La Inca was always there” (161), to comfort and reassure her, reinforcing the notion of the healing, potentially redemptive power of ordinary human solidarity and affection.

While Beli and La Inca struggle to get the seriously injured young man back home to New Jersey, Oscar refuses to board a plane, despite his continuing physical agony -- which Yuniór observes, “says a lot about this fat kid’s fortitude” (303). Oscar again dreams of “an Aslan-like figure with golden eyes” (302), although this time he cannot hear Aslan’s words, perhaps because he has already chosen “More,” so it is now up to him to write the rest of the story. In another dream, Oscar sees an old man holding up a book with blank pages. Critics such as Monica Hannah, Ignacio Lopez-Calvo, and T.S. Miller place heavy emphasis on the motif of the missing book (the one Abelard was supposedly writing, as well as Oscar’s lost final manuscript) as reinforcing claims of epistemological uncertainty and gaps in historical as well as personal narratives that can never be considered complete nor truly reliable. Yet the book with blank pages can be regarded as indicating that human choice is the determining factor in the endless struggle between *fana* and *fuku*, and that each person fills in the blank pages of his or her life, one day at a time, by the deliberate decisions he or she makes, or avoids making. Oscar has advised Yuniór that he intends to become the Dominican Tolkien (192), and that his “quartet of novels . . . May be the death of me” (195), just as Frodo consciously risks death to return the Ring to the subterranean fires where it can finally be destroyed. Oscar’s love for females and his love for reading and writing are all part of a single all-consuming passion, a life sustaining force that is evident in his early encounter with Ana

Obregon: “He was totally and irrevocably in love with Ana. . . . The only thing that came close was how he felt about his books” (44-45).

The preponderance of evidence in the text highlights Oscar’s remarkable courage in claiming his right to love Ybon; he surrenders his life in order to be with her. Oscar understands that he must choose between love and fear. He decides to fill in the blank pages of his life with love, even if that choice inevitably leads to his death. Oscar feels a responsibility to confront and challenge the capitan, intuitively perceiving that men like the capitan (and Balaguer and Trujillo) can only maintain their control over others through fear, “the mind killer;” Oscar sacrifices his life not only out of love for Ybon, but for his sister and his mother’s sake, as well, and, by inference, for the sake of all victims of brutality and venality, all the hapless subjects of the curse. Oscar’s decision to choose love, despite the price he knows he will most certainly have to pay, creates a force potent enough to dispel any curse. The fuku generated by willful human evil finds itself, in the end, completely erased in the face of the fana produced by a human decision to opt for solidarity over domination, collaboration over competition, and generosity over greed. Oscar intuitively understands that if he can dispel his inner terror and embrace his last chance for love, he will somehow be engineering a dramatic transformation that might well prove universal as well as individual in scope.

Clives is both astonished and dismayed to see Oscar back on the Island, but Oscar just grimly explains, “It’s the Ancient Powers. . . . They won’t leave me alone” (315). Oscar’s determination does not at all suggest naïve recklessness on his part; he remains fully cognizant of the risk he must be prepared to take. When he finally meets Ybon on the street, she urges him to leave the Island, but he asks instead “if he could just have a

week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine in him and he would be able to face what he would have to face” (316). Oscar insists that Lola’s fears for his safety are misplaced “because she didn’t understand what was at stake” (319). His courage and self-sacrifice, like Aslan’s, creates an irresistible counter spell, one that is far reaching in proportions: “Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own . . . he was Unus the Untouchable” (319).<sup>191</sup>

Oscar informs Yunion over the phone that he has written three hundred pages during the twenty-seven days he has been in the DR, and that he “Almost had it too;” maybe he did, because the next time “Oscar didn’t cry when they drove him back to the canefields.” When Clives begs Grod and Grundy to stop savaging Oscar in the back seat of the taxi, Oscar serenely reassures his friend that these thugs no longer have any power over him, or anyone else: “Oscar laughed a little . . . through his broken mouth. Don’t worry, Clives, he said. They’re too late” (320). Facing imminent death, Oscar “tried to stand bravely,” calmly informing his assassins:

[in] words coming out like they belonged to someone else . . . that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world . . . a rare thing . . . He told them about Ybon and the way he loved her and . . . told them it was only because of her love that he had been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop. (321)

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<sup>191</sup> Unus the Untouchable creates a force field that protects him from harm in the Marvel comic book *X-Men*.

Reflecting a fashionable predilection for imposing theoretical formulations on literary texts, regardless of what close readings seem to suggest, Lyn Di Iorio Sandin argues that it is not Ybon, but rather the capitan who is the object of Oscar's all-consuming passion. Sandin transposes Rene Girard's speculations about mimetic desire, "the fundamental human dynamic" in which "objects desired by . . . [an] other . . . are . . . mimetically desired by the subject" (15-16), onto the text of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in order to elucidate Oscar's supposed hidden motivation.<sup>192</sup> According to Sandin's analysis, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic after the beating in the cane field "for the pleasure of being fucked with a second time;" thus, "Oscar is . . . able to actualize the homosocial desire latent in machista Latino culture" (30-31), which apparently resides in all Latin males, whether they admit to this totalizing truth or not. This means that even though Oscar may not realize it, he would actually rather engage in sex with the capitan than with Ybon, since, according to Sandin, "the desire for women as objects often serves as a conduit through which the homosocial desire for other men manifests" (30-31). Oscar only believes that he is physically attracted to females due to incessant social conditioning, because of what he has been brainwashed into thinking, because of what he has been induced "to imitate from the beginning of his life when parents and friends throw the little boy at girls" (28). Such is his hapless confusion that Ybon is eventually forced to take the initiative in order to bring their physical relationship to sexual consummation: "Ybon finally deflowers Oscar because she, who is usually passive and indifferent, is provoked by Oscar's simultaneous flight from, and pursuit of

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<sup>192</sup> Sandin, Lyn Di Iorio. "The Latino Scapegoat: Knowledge through Death in Short Stories by Joyce Carol Oates and Junot Diaz." *Contemporary Latino/a Literary Criticism* (2007): 15-33.



the Capitan” (30). Sandin does not feel the need to support any of these sweeping claims with confirming citations from the novel, most probably because none exist; her interpretation is worth explicating merely because it demonstrates once again how far critical analysis strays from close reading when theoretical assumptions are peremptorily superimposed upon a literary text.

Elena Machado Saez seems likewise convinced that Oscar fails to appreciate the true nature of his sexual proclivities. In Saez’s analysis, Oscar’s libidinal confusion becomes entangled in the epistemological/ontological Gordian Knot of who exactly, if anyone, actually writes the novel, and whether the resulting text deconstructs itself to the point of utter indeterminacy. On one hand, “Yunior’s position as sole narrator” (527) enables him to define the overall theme: “Yunior equates normative Dominican diaspora identity with heterosexuality. Oscar’s final transformation from virgin to Dominican man is part of the foundational logic driving the novel.” (526)<sup>193</sup> At the same time, supposedly, Junot Diaz “shows that the project of domestication, of defining the authentic diasporic subject, requires the violent silencing of Oscar’s queerness” (527). Compounding the problematic, Yunior must also be profoundly confused regarding the true nature of his sexual desires, for it turns out that it is not females that Yunior is really interested in, after all. Unbeknownst to him, Yunior is actually enamored of Oscar: “The pretty lie of Oscar’s final initiation and devirginization . . . requires Yunior . . . to purge the romantic interest that he himself has in Oscar.” Adding to the jumble, Saez challenges authorial agency, claiming that Junot Diaz is also hopelessly confused regarding the

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<sup>193</sup> Saez, Elena Machado. “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance.” *Contemporary Literature* 52.3 (2011): 522-555.

veracity of the literary text that he (or perhaps Yuniór) produces: “By pulling back the veil of an omniscient voice and revealing Yuniór as the narrator, Díaz underscores the dangers involved in accepting the authenticity of any historical narrative, even the fiction that he himself writes” (527), since it is presumably the narrator, a character in the story, who determines its questionable theme.

Because they impose arbitrary theoretical assumptions onto the novel, both Sandin and Saez miss the crucial significance of Oscar’s ultimate transformation. As with the case of Sandin’s imposition of Girard’s theory, there is no support in the actual text for Saez’s speculations about Oscar’s “queerness” and Yuniór’s secret infatuation with Oscar. Furthermore, Saez and Sandin’s arguments seem to be forced in the light of Yuniór and Oscar’s obvious, obsessive preoccupation with the opposite sex. Yuniór’s manifest problem is that he likes females too much, so much that he finds it impossible to remain faithful to a monogamous relationship. Oscar’s heterosexual passion provides the main drive for his entire way of life; when he finds himself falling in love with Ybon:

Oscar . . . realized with unusual clarity that he was heading down that road again where he became so nuts over a girl that he stopped thinking. The road where very bad things happened. You should stop right now, he told himself. But he knew, with lapidary clarity, that he wasn’t going to stop. He loved Ybon. (And love, for this kid, was a geas, something that could not be shaken or denied). (292)

Falling in love with one of his imagined damsels in distress is such an all-consuming experience for Oscar that he loses all sense of himself. After spending the entire night waiting outside Manny’s apartment with his uncle’s Colt .45, he confesses to Lola, “I

don't know if I'm even here" (48). This overwhelming desire for sexual union with a female cannot be written off as mere infatuation or a socially constructed cognitive compulsion; Oscar's body seems to know exactly how it feels, as well as what it wants to do; right after Oscar and Ybon finish speaking together for the very first time, "On went the shades, up went the ass, out went the bellaza. Oscar's erection following like a dowser's wand" (280), thirsting for a crucial natural resource of which Oscar has too long been deprived.

Like Sandin, Saez deconstructs Oscar's fateful determination to return to the Dominican Republic after he is nearly beaten to death by Grod and Grundy, assuming that his attitude could not possibly imply what it appears to signify -- an extraordinarily courageous decision to defy death by confronting the capitan for the sake of his love for Ybon. According to Saez's deconstruction, Oscar only pursues Ybon because she is a convenient tool for accomplishing what he believes he is supposed to achieve in order to qualify as a proper Dominican male: "the conclusion of the novel sees the recuperation of Oscar as man and Dominican through the body of Ybon," which seems only appropriate: "After all, a woman whose career is in the sex trafficking would be the most realistic point of access for poor, pathetic Oscar" (537). There is no mention here of any actual affection being exchanged between Oscar and Ybon, of the countless hours they spend talking together, of her chronic loneliness and how he seems to be her only real friend, or of how he listens patiently while she conveys her life story, telling him about her two sons who are being raised by their grandparents in Puerto Rico, describing the perils and hardships of women in her profession, and so on. Instead, Ybon is reduced to a cheap "point of access," while her devoted admirer is dismissed as "poor, pathetic Oscar."

According to Saez's analysis, Oscar's dignified imperturbability when he faces Grod and Grundy for the second time must be likewise trivialized: "His lack of tears is the principal indicator that Oscar has finally learned either to rein in or purge that feminine weakness that dominated his body, behavior, and mind." For Saez, "the transformative power of his relationship with Ybon" amounts to nothing more than an alteration in physical plumbing. What Oscar refers to as "the thing he had done, the thing they could no longer stop" can be deconstructed to the simple fact that he has finally lost his virginity: "What is this 'thing' that Oscar has accomplished? . . . Yunion discloses that . . . 'Ybon actually *fucked* him!' . . . Oscar emerges as a devirginized, unsentimental hero who is delivered into authenticity through Ybon's body" (537-538). Saez's reductive evaluation conflates and passes over her own obvious disconnect between "unsentimental hero" and "poor, pathetic Oscar" within the same paragraph, but this self-contradiction by no means qualifies her insistence that what Diaz refers to as the "lesson" of the novel amounts to nothing more than a matter of basic biology and an immigrant male initiation ritual.

Other critics express serious reservations about Oscar's commitment to Ybon, as well, underestimating the significance of the courageous decision he makes. Juanita Heredia believes that Ybon represents a poor choice for a partner, a choice that is most probably a product of the legendary family curse: "Oscar falls for an unrealistic mate . . . [he is a] victim of love . . . [and thus] dies a hopeless romantic, tragic hero, struck by the curse of fuku" (218). Stacey Balkan considers Oscar a self-deluded, pitiable idealist who ignorantly cooperates in his own destruction, describing him as: "Oscar, a character teeming with quixotic naivete . . . a neocolonial indio complicit in his own exploitation . . .

. Diaz's pathetic Oscar" (100).<sup>194</sup> Daniel Bautista regards Oscar as a victim of his own fantasies, an invert who meets a sad, untimely end because he lives in a make-believe world that inevitably clashes disastrously with the hard facts of reality: "Oscar's quixotic dreams of living his life according to the values of his favorite science fiction and comic book heroes contribute to his tragic end" (41).<sup>195</sup>

Yet these perspectives fail to account for the total transformation in Oscar by the end of the novel, the confident strength he demonstrates as he confronts certain death, the abundant evidence that he is well aware of the consequences he is facing, the fact that Ybon represents what Oscar perceives to be his final opportunity for realization of his lifelong dream. Jose David Saldivar discounts the numerous allusions in the novel to *The Lord of the Rings* and their possible correlation with Oscar's idealistic determination because of what he perceives to be the "reactionary nostalgia for Christianity and the medieval world found in . . . Tolkien's work" (130), but it could be argued that for Tolkien, the medieval world serves merely as a useful metaphor, and that it is not Christianity as a religious ideology, but rather the model of self-sacrifice for the sake of others that is found in the timeless story of Christ's crucifixion -- manifested in Frodo and Sam's dread journey into the kingdom of death -- that comprises the heart of Tolkien's vision for a better world.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Balkan, Stacey. " 'City of Clowns': The City as a Performative Space in the Prose of Daniel Alarcon, Junot Diaz, and Roberto Bolano." *Wretched Refuge: Immigrants and Itinerants in the Postmodern*. Ed. Jessica Datema and Diane Krumrey. New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, pp. 89-107.

<sup>195</sup> Bautista, Daniel. "Junot Diaz and the *Lucha Libre*." *Sargasso* 2008-09, II (2008):41-55.

<sup>196</sup> Saldivar, Jose David. "Conjectures on 'Americanity' and Junot Diaz's 'Fuku Americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. *The Global South* 5.1 (2011): 120-136.

Ramon Saldívar argues that “justice, poetic or otherwise, is precisely what we do *not* get at the end of *Oscar Wao*” (571), yet this assumption too ignores the implications of Oscar’s final transformation, and the effect that Oscar’s example obviously has on others.<sup>197</sup> Yuniór finally gives up his self-indulgent, self-destructive playboy ways: “Took ten years to the day . . . until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn’t give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win” (325). Yuniór settles down, gets married, begins teaching and coaching -- looking out for the interests of the people around him instead of just devoting all his attention to a narcissistic self. He also takes up serious writing: “From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar” (326).

Richard Patteson contends that “For Yuniór . . . the book he writes is an effort to fill the blank left by Oscar’s death” (16).<sup>198</sup> What is more, Yuniór’s account of Oscar’s brief, wondrous life provides a legacy of hope and promise for Lola’s daughter Isis, who “one day . . . will stop being afraid and . . . will come looking for answers. . . . 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” (330-331). To what?, one may ask: why, to the *fuku*, of course. Isis inherits a rich tradition of courageous selflessness and self-sacrifice from her forbears, one that has already demonstrated, despite indescribable suffering and serious setbacks, the power of the *fana* of love over the *fuku* generated through hatred and greed.

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<sup>197</sup> Saldívar, Ramon. “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Posttrace Aesthetics in Contemporary Fiction.” *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 574-599.

<sup>198</sup> Patteson, Richard. “Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Ariel* 42.3-4 (2012): 5-20.

Postmodernists may discount the potency of belief in the story of Jesus, but the principle of self-sacrifice for the sake of others provides a bedrock metaphor for writers who ascribe to a universal ethic, and who advocate for the cause of social justice and human rights.<sup>199</sup> Even a writer as far removed from personal investment in Western culture as Ngugi gives credence to the power of Christ's example in this regard: "the word that breathes life is still needed to challenge the one that carries death and devastation. In rising to the challenge, the intellectual of our times would be working in the tradition of the first intellectual who made the word become flesh" (39).<sup>200</sup> Yuniors makes it clear that Oscar's tragic yet inspiring example has left a lasting impression on the people who were close to him; the only question that remains to be answered is whether Yuniors, Isis, as well as all those who read the novel will be brave enough to rise above their fear of the fuku and fill in the paginas en blanco of their own lives with healing, transformative love, empathy, and compassion. In Yuniors's dreams, Oscar holds up a book whose pages are blank, offering the potential for "*Zafa*." But sometimes in this dream, when Yuniors looks at Oscar, "he has no face and I wake up screaming" (325). There is every chance, however, that human beings collectively might somehow emulate Oscar's courageous behavior, in one way or another; at any rate, as Yuniors reassures his audience at the end of his narrative: "That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream" (331).

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<sup>199</sup> Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is an outstanding example; one finds this idea reflected to varying degrees in other classic literary works, as well, including John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

<sup>200</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. "For Peace, Justice, and Culture: The Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century." *Profession* (2006): 33-39.

## Writing into Silence

For all the skepticism that critics express with regard to the true status of the fuku, and their persistent concerns about constructed histories, along with gaps and uncertainties -- paginas en blanco -- in ambiguous, self-undermining texts, close scrutiny of the numerous interviews Junot Diaz has given over the years suggests rather compelling conclusions about the meaning and purpose of his literary work. It turns out, for example, that Diaz's idea of the fuku does not originate with the novel, but instead constitutes a central component of Caribbean legend. As Diaz confides to his colleague and close friend Edwidge Danticat during their conversation shortly after *Oscar Wao*'s 2007 publication, "the fuku has been one of those Dominican concepts that have fascinated me for years. Our Island (and a lot of countries around it) has a long tradition of believing in curses. The fuku . . . was the one curse that explicitly implicated the historical trauma of our creation, as an area, a people" (90).<sup>201</sup>

The fuku in *Oscar Wao*, it seems, rather than just an ordinary popular superstition or some vague, ambiguous curse, represents a key piece of silenced Caribbean history. The fuku whispers tales that disclose the savage underbelly of so-called civilization, revealing a shameful record of calculated injustice that powerful elites are anxious to erase from public memory. Diaz's novel speaks into the deliberate gaps left in official narratives in order to challenge and debunk hegemony's self-serving interpretations: "All societies are organized by the silences they need to maintain. I think the role of art is to try to delineate, break, and introduce language into some of these silences. I think more than anything I was just trying to get people to acknowledge how much of what we call

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<sup>201</sup> Danticat, Edwidge. "Junot Diaz." *BOMB* 101 (2007): 89-95.



‘Caribbean history and culture’ is, in reality, one vast silence.”<sup>202</sup> The story of Oscar Wao’s confrontation with the fuku provokes readers to question conventional accounts of Columbus’s “discovery,” and recognize the blank spaces in a tragic human story that only marginalized voices of suppressed subalterns can fill. Diaz attempts to open people’s eyes to harsh realities they have been systematically programmed not to recognize: “the real issue of the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fuku -- but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level. To be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us” (Danticat 90).

Diaz’s novel also makes it clear that the fuku is not simply a matter of collective trauma in the past, but rather that this insidious curse still persists as an ongoing blight on human affairs, continuing to warp and distort daily life in contemporary global societies, causing indescribable suffering. Transnational corporate elites persist in imposing their self-serving agenda of predatory exploitation in the neoliberal era, simply picking up from where the former imperial powers left off. Rafael Trujillo was a willing instrument of U.S. business interests, an all too typical, local hit man for the ruling mafia don in D.C., a well trained, ruthless puppet. His were hardly supernatural powers; the violence and terror he exercised derived from his role as the Dominican Republic’s enforcer for the hemisphere’s monolithic economic hegemon: “Trujillo was one of the U.S.’s favorite sons, one of its children. He was created and sustained by the U.S.’s political-military machine. I wanted to write about the demon child of the U.S., the one who was inflicted upon the Dominican Republic,” just as Columbus and the conquistadors had been

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<sup>202</sup> Moreno, Marisol. “‘The Important Things Hide in Plain Sight’: A Conversation with Junot Diaz.” *Latino Studies* 8.4 (2010): 532-542.

inflicted upon Hispaniola and the Caribbean by the Spanish crown half a millennium earlier, introducing “a demon . . . through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (*Oscar Wao* 1). El Jefe was just another poisonous manifestation of a chronic global malady: “Trujillo exemplifies the negative forces that have for so long beleaguered the peoples of the New World.”<sup>203</sup>

The significance of the recurring motif of *paginas en blanco* that runs throughout the text of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* derives not only from the notion that Oscar overcomes the *fuku* by writing the story of his own life, as each of us faces the challenge to do, but also from the fact that Junot Diaz is writing a version of the story of the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean that has heretofore been suppressed; he is filling in pages of history books that have been deliberately left blank. Children in the United States are typically educated to view Christopher Columbus as an intrepid explorer, an epic, legendary hero who carried forth the torch of Christian civilization on a noble crusade to uplift and enlighten a benighted pagan underworld. Students never learn about the systematic rape and mutilation practiced by the Spanish, the forced, deadly labor imposed on Native Americans in New Spain’s gold and silver mines, the unparalleled genocide systematically conducted by the conquistadors -- a scale of wanton slaughter that makes even Hitler seem like a mere neophyte in comparison. The horrors of slavery are glossed over in classroom textbooks; atrocities committed by Latin American dictators are blamed on uniquely evil individuals, rather than on the neo-imperial political-economic system that creates and sustains them, and that grooms

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<sup>203</sup> O’Rourke, Meghan. *Slate* (Nov. 8, 2007).

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_highbrow/2007/11/the\\_brief\\_wondrous\\_life\\_of\\_oscar\\_wao.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_highbrow/2007/11/the_brief_wondrous_life_of_oscar_wao.html)>

efficient substitutes ready to step in when traditional favorites prove unsuitable or inconvenient and suddenly need to be replaced -- just as Balaguer followed automatically in the footsteps of Trujillo. The vast majorities of human beings who are condemned to wretched, desperate poverty remain invisible to polite Western society; subalterns are blamed for their miserable plight, and consigned to brutal repression if they dare to resist.

The carefully constructed silences that disguise and rationalize these pervasive social injustices keep the privileged classes within developed countries lulled into complacent ignorance: “what fascinates me is how people ‘un-see.’ How societies are trained not to see . . . The world has organized itself to be completely blind about what happened in the New World, specifically what happened in the Caribbean” (29-30).<sup>204</sup> In his 2008 interview with Armando Celayo and David Shook, Junot Diaz describes the Caribbean as “the site of the original sin,” and comments further, “I think it’s no accident that the site of the crime has been sort of anesthetized and amnesiatized into the place of sun and fun and rum. I think that says it *all* about how severe and terrifying that original crater is in our imagination” (9).<sup>205</sup> Judgment and punishment are necessary for obviating criminal transgression; original sin requires recognition, if there is to be any chance for redemption.

By writing into the blank pages of history the stories of the under classes, the innocent victims who suffer from the arbitrary cruelty and brutality of self-serving elites, Junot Diaz hopes to expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of prevailing ideology. *The Brief*

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<sup>204</sup> Miranda, Katherine. “Junot Diaz, Diaspora, and Redemption: Creating Progressive Imaginaries.” *Sargasso* 2008-09.II (2008): 23-39.

<sup>205</sup> Celayo, Armando and David Shook. “In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Diaz.” *World Literature Today online* March 2008  
<<http://www.ou.edu/worldlit/onlinemagazine/2008march/Junot-Diazs.htm>>

*Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* speaks into secret places in the Caribbean's past to reveal unpleasant truths that have for centuries been kept carefully hidden:

this book is an arrow to what's missing. And the 'paginas en blanco' is just a metaphor for that. . . . My whole dream was to get the community I was born in to recognize that it had a hole the size of its country in the middle of itself." There is an empty space at the heart of the Dominican Republic that its citizens "cannot even talk about. There is not even the language.<sup>206</sup>

This hole is analogous to the vast gap in the consciousness of citizens in the United States, who bear implicit responsibility for the crimes that their elected leaders have committed -- and brazenly continue to commit -- in their name, and in the name of "democracy" and "freedom," in the name of a political ideology that promotes economic exploitation of the many, the vast majority of humanity, for the exclusive benefit of a radically restricted few, a tiny plutocracy that presumes the right to dominate the entire world.

Rather than introduce ambiguity and uncertainty, Junot Diaz's literary strategy of borrowing from the discourses of science fiction, fantasy, and horror purposely aims at breaking down the walls of silence that prevent readers from recognizing what would otherwise be obvious in plain sight:

Why this continued commitment to genres? So much of our experience as Caribbean Diasporic peoples, so much of it, exists in silence. How can we talk about our experiences in any way if both our own local culture and the

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<sup>206</sup> Moreno, Marisol. "The Important Things Hide in Plain Sight'."

larger global culture doesn't want to talk about them and actively resists our attempt to create language around them? Well, my strategy was to seek models at the narrative margins. . . . If you're looking for language that will help you approach our nigh-unbearable historical experiences you can reach for narratives of the impossible: sci-fi, horror, fantasy, which might not really want to talk about people of color at all but that takes what we've experienced (without knowing it) very seriously indeed. . . . the metaphors that the genres have established (mostly off the back of our experiences as people of color: the eternal other) can be reclaimed and subverted and expanded in useful ways that help clarify and immediate-ize our own histories.<sup>207</sup>

Tragically, as Diaz implies, the fictional representations found in horror and sci-fi have countless precedents in ordinary human reality. Read with empathy, C.L.R. James's description of living conditions beneath the decks of Middle Passage human cargo ships challenges the most vivid and dreadful of genre accounts:

slaves were packed in the hold on galleries one above the other. Each was given only four or five feet in length and two or three feet in height, so that they could neither lie at full length nor sit upright. . . . the revolts at port of embarkation and on board were incessant, so that the slaves had to be chained, right hand to right leg, left hand to left leg, and attached in rows to long iron bars. In this position they lived for the voyage [which typically lasted seven weeks or longer], coming up once a day for exercise

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<sup>207</sup> Danticat. "Junot Diaz." p. 92.

and to allow sailors to ‘clean the pails.’ But when the cargo was rebellious or the weather bad, then they stayed below for weeks at a time. The close proximity of so many naked human beings, their bruised and festering flesh, the foetid air, the prevailing dysentery, the accumulation of filth, turned these holds into a hell. (8)<sup>208</sup>

Patrick Chamoiseau’s account of life for slaves on Caribbean plantations is equally disturbing:

that most searing day-after-day distress . . . Imagine not misery or anguish, but well-trained reflexes for which there was no reason at all to Exist [sic]. We would set out for the fields without even raising our heads. The Long-beasts [poisonous snakes] knew how to bring us down when, bent over the soil, we combed out the long, burning hair of suffering. Imagine not grief (that was too absolute to be constant), but the slow vertigo of absence. . . . the body sank into pain: hands were raw, singing with scratches from saw grasses. . . . the field swallowed us up until the anus of nightfall. Think of that, repeated times without number . . . the death suffered each hour in the almost fatal acceptance of this slow drowning. . . . What you thought was essential breaks apart, dangling uselessly. . . . Now you are no more than gaping nothingness. (110-111)<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989.

<sup>209</sup> Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

The description of a slave's hand being pulled between the crushing stones of a sugar cane mill, a frequent occurrence on the plantation, rivals the most lurid fantasies conjured by Stephen King:

Oh a finger's caught! The beast awakens in an inexorable slushing of ground-up bones and flesh. The hand is tugged in before your helpless eyes. Then the arm. The shoulder. You can barely cry out. The cane juice turns rusty with blood and marrow. The water of your soul is squeezed out and gushes down into the tubs. What greater horror than a sugar press jammed with the stubborn, grimacing head of a nigger? (112).

Any slave guilty of the temerity of insisting on equal rights as a human being, and seeking to escape such brutalizing bondage in order to attain his or her freedom, could expect only the harshest punishment if caught. Michelle Cliff's description of the usual practice of Clare's ancestor (a matter of "family pride") in such cases recalls the shocked dismay of Coetzee's magistrate, and his outrage that one would not treat even an animal this way:

The recaptured slave was strung up in front of the quarters, where the queen's justice applied the cat-o'-tails to his or her back. The number of lashes depended upon the exertion the justice was capable of on a given afternoon, or morning. Usually about a hundred or so strokes. After the whipping, the slave had salt rubbed into the wounds on his or her back. Then the slave was hanged by the neck until dead . . . Finally the rebel was cut down and the justice dissected the naked body of the African man or woman into four parts. Each quadrant was suspended by rope from a tree

at a corner of the property, where it stayed until the vultures . . . or the bluebottle flies finished it off. (30)<sup>210</sup>

This kind of gothic barbarism is by no means confined to the distant past; Abelard's treatment in Trujillo's twentieth century prison conjures visions from a manmade hell:

Only been inside a week but already he looked frightful. His eyes were blackened; his hands and neck covered in bruises and his torn lip had swollen monstrously, was the color of the meat inside your eye. The night before, he had been interrogated by the guards, and they had beaten him mercilessly with leather truncheons; one of his testicles would be permanently shriveled from the blows. (*Oscar Wao* 241)

Contemporary reports of prisoner abuse in U.S. military detention centers around the world evoke images that are equally disturbing, challenging the capacities of ordinary language for articulation. Nor are such horrors limited to the institutional practice of torturing subalterns who fail to cooperate or choose to resist. Degrading living conditions imposed by extreme poverty create indescribable misery for countless disenfranchised human beings. In Diaz's short story "No Face," Ysrael's nightmares serve as an especially terrifying testimony to this fact, easily comparable to Chamoiseau's portrait of a slave being ground to pulp in the sugar mill:

On some nights he opens his eyes and the pig has come back. Always huge and pale. Its hooves peg his chest down and he can smell the curdled bananas on its breath. Blunt teeth rip a strip from under his eye and the

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<sup>210</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*. New York: Penguin, 1984.



muscle revealed is delicious, like lechosa. He turns his head to save one side of his face; in some dreams he saves the right side and in some his left but in the worst ones he cannot turn his head; its mouth is like a pothole and nothing can escape it. When he awakens he's screaming as the blood braids down his neck; he's bitten his tongue and it swells and he cannot sleep again until he tells himself to be a man (157-158)<sup>211</sup>

David Stannard points out that the mass slaughter carried out by the conquistadors in the Caribbean in the course of their frenzied accumulation of private wealth is by no means just a matter of the distant past; capitalist exploitation continues its inexorable compulsion for creating wanton social havoc:

the genocide in the Americas, and in other places where the world's indigenous peoples survive, has never really ceased. As recently as 1986, the Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States observed that 40,000 people had simply 'disappeared' in Guatemala during the preceding fifteen years. Another 100,000 had been openly murdered. That is the equivalent, in the United States, of more than 4,000,000 people slaughtered or removed under official government decree. (xv)

These indigenous people, then as now, had to be exterminated because their physical presence interfered with the expansion of business enterprise; the methods may be modern, but the motives -- as well as the victims -- remain very much the same:

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<sup>211</sup> Diaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

Almost all those dead and disappeared were Indians, direct descendents . . . of the Mayas, creators of one of the most splendid civilizations that this earth has ever seen. Today, as five centuries ago, people are being tortured and slaughtered, their homes and villages bombed and razed . . . The murder and destruction continue, with the aid and assistance of the United States . . . many of the detailed accounts from contemporary observers read much like those recorded by the conquistadors' chroniclers nearly 500 years earlier. (xv)

U.S. corporate interests insisted on and enabled local government policies by which "more than 1,000,000 of Guatemala's approximately 4,000,000 natives were being displaced by the deliberate burning and wasting of their ancestral lands," in order to make room for further so-called economic progress. The twin process of economic exploitation and political oppression, although more carefully disguised, is essentially identical within the borders of the United States as well, in "reservations and urban slums of North America, where more sophisticated indirect government violence has precisely the same effect" (xiii-xiv).<sup>212</sup>

Michelle Cliff observes that slavery was just a particularly brazen and flagrant manifestation of the brutality that is typical of the world-wide program of human exploitation that is intrinsic to capitalist ideology and practice:

Slavery was not an aberration -- it was an extreme. Consider the tea plantations of Ceylon and China. The coffee plantations of Sumatra and

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<sup>212</sup> Stannard, David. *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. New York: Oxford U P, 1992.

Colombia. The tobacco plantations of Pakistan and the Philippines. The mills of Lowell. Manchester. Leeds. Marseilles. The mines of Wales. Alsasace-Lorraine. The railroads of the Union-Pacific. Cape-to-Cairo. All worked by captive labor. . . . The enslavement of Black people -- African peoples -- with its procession of naked and chained human beings, whipping of human beings, rape of human beings -- made other forms of employment in the upkeep of western civilization seem pale. So slavery in-fact -- which was distasteful to some coffee-drinkers and tea-drinkers, who might have read about these things or saw them illustrated in newspapers . . . slavery in-fact was abolished, and the freedom which followed on abolition turned into veiled slavery, the model of the rest of the western world.<sup>213</sup>

Thus it is that Yunion's father is forced to labor on despite a severely injured back in "Negocios," and Ramon in "Otravida, Otravez" lives in a state of constant dread, haunted by thoughts of ending up like the man he recommended for the job and who fell to his death on the factory floor. Beli works herself beyond human endurance despite being seriously ill with cancer: "trying to keep a second job, for the first time since her operation. It wasn't working out. She was coming home exhausted" (62). Nevertheless, she is condemned to remain in bondage to an economic system that recognizes no rights except those that promote private profits. Lola observes ruefully: "On the last minute of the last day my mother would be at work. She would be at work when the missiles were in the air" (67). Such hardship is hardly the consequence of some vague, mysterious,

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

supernatural fuku; if a curse is involved, it is manmade, and therefore ought to be amenable to a human counter spell.

Lola's allusion to nuclear Armageddon emphasizes the ultimately destructive force of the capitalist agenda, which accepts no limits to its all-consuming appetites, recognizes no moral constraints, and sustains itself solely by means of terror and extreme violence. David Stannard compares the violent invasion of European imperialism into the New World to the consequences of nuclear devastation, referring to the level of destruction as defying comprehension:

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. . . . what happened on Hispaniola was the equivalent of more than fifty Hiroshimas. And Hispaniola was only the beginning. . . . the 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.<sup>214</sup>

As Stannard poignantly observes, the enormity of the human catastrophe precipitated by the heartless avarice of the conquistadors challenges even our capacity for imagination. This blood spattered record is a crucial part of the terrible void in Western history that governing elites contrive to keep carefully concealed, but that a creative artist like Junot Diaz strives courageously to reveal, for only an honest appraisal of the awful injustices that have occurred, as well as those that continue to transpire, can enable humanity to come to terms with these terrible realities, and create the opportunity at last

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. p. x.

for us to begin to heal. As a fiction writer, Diaz finds himself forced to rely on horror and science fiction to convey a story that could not possibly be communicated in any other way.

Eduardo Galeano, writing in 1971, employed the same comparison to nuclear war that Stannard uses to describe the widespread devastation caused by extreme poverty throughout Central and South America during the early stages of the second half of the twentieth century, when neoliberal doctrine was just beginning to bite even deeper into the region's socio-political processes, in order to facilitate extraction of ever larger shares of Latin America's enormous natural resources -- which transnational corporate elites adamantly insist must be made available for their exclusive benefit, rather than for enhancing quality of life for local populations. According to Galeano,

The human murder by poverty in Latin America is secret; every year, without making a sound, three Hiroshima bombs explode over communities that have become accustomed to suffering with clenched teeth. The systematic violence is not apparent but is real and constantly increasing: its holocausts are not made known in the sensational press but in Food and Agricultural statistics.<sup>215</sup>

The ongoing slaughter of innocents must be kept disguised, because such crimes are clearly impossible to justify.

Nuclear weapons provide the ultimate means of exercising economic control through global terror. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is replete with references to

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<sup>215</sup> Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p.5.

actual as well as potential nuclear contamination, devastation, and ultimate holocaust.<sup>216</sup>

The social catastrophe precipitated by predatory capitalism is likewise associated with natural disasters, as well as the Man with No Face -- the emblem of pitiless, impersonal death. On Beli's ride back to Bali after she is left stranded by the Gangster:

they passed through one of those godforsaken blisters of a community that frequently afflict the arteries between major cities, sad assemblages of shacks that seem to have been deposited in situ by a hurricane or other such calamity. . . . a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved to her as she passed. (135)

The bleakness of intensifying poverty and the spreading poison of pollution are described in terms of a cancer linked to atomic attack: "In those days the cities hadn't yet metastasized into kaiju, menacing one another with smoky, teeming tendrils of shanties" (145-146). When Beli finally stirs from her nearly fatal beating in the cane field, she awakens to a dirge, "a grade of grief unlike any she'd encountered before . . . a cacophony of wails that seemed to have torn free from the cracked soul of humanity itself. Like a funeral song for the entire planet" (54).<sup>217</sup>

It is by now a well-established scientific certainty that energy corporations' runaway obsession with ever increasing profits, regardless of the inevitable environmental consequences, assures ongoing weather related and other ecological calamities that will seriously degrade quality of life on Earth, and may even threaten the

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<sup>216</sup> Examples can be found on pp. 1, 42, 65, 67, 106, 126, 129, 145, 236-237, 247, 256 (footnote #32), 257-258.

<sup>217</sup> Beli mistakenly believes it is she who is dying, although the actual occasion is public panic following the assassination of Trujillo, as if the dictator takes the rest of humanity with him when he meets his death.

long term survival of the human species. Similar blind compulsions for endless profit on the part of arms and weapons manufacturers, primarily those in the United States, guarantee a permanent state of global warfare, and steer the world on a collision course toward nuclear Armageddon. Eighty percent of the human population is now considered irrelevant to the corporate agenda for wealth accumulation, and has therefore been effectively consigned to slow, agonizing extinction.

It is hardly surprising that Junot Diaz refers to contemporary neoliberal economic practices as “the cannibal stage” of capitalism, “the zombie stage of capitalism where entire nations are being rendered through alchemy into not-quite-alive.” Diaz is attempting to open the global community’s eyes, through his interviews, essays, and fiction, to the fact that humanity is fast approaching what may well be a terminal stage in its history:

where is this all leading? . . . We need the revelations that come from our apocalypses -- and never so much as we do now. Without this knowledge how can we ever hope to take responsibility for the social practices that bring on our disasters? And how can we ever hope to take responsibility for the collective response that will be needed to alleviate the misery? . . .

We must stare into the ruins -- bravely, resolutely -- and we must see. And then we must act. Our very lives depend on it. (50)<sup>218</sup>

When Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin return to the Shire at the end of the third volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, they find that Saruman’s cronies have been hard at work while they were away. Sam immediately identifies the system of corporate-style

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<sup>218</sup> Diaz, Junot. “Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal.” *Boston Review* 36.3 (2011): 46-52.

exploitation these thugs have set up as “worse than Mordor,” to which Frodo promptly replies, “Yes, this is Mordor. Just one of its works” (994).<sup>219</sup> Although Saruman warns, “I have already done much that you will find it hard to mend or undo in your lives,” and threatens a fuku of his own -- “Whoever strikes me shall be accursed” (995) -- Sam and company quickly organize the community, relying on the efficacy of grassroots democracy, and begin the laborious process of establishing social justice and restoring a healthier balance with Mother Nature -- assisted in this arduous task by “thousands of willing hands of all ages” (999). The fortuitous outcome that these Hobbits engender serves as an obvious model for the kind of collective awakening and restorative response that Diaz seems to envision for planet Earth in our time, although happy endings are far easier to find in fantasy than to realize in actual life.

Daniel Bautista argues that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a far more pessimistic narrative than Tolkien’s trilogy:

Largely eschewing its more heroic elements, Diaz borrows almost exclusively from the dark and monstrous aspects of Tolkien’s world . . . [there is an] absence of allusions to more hopeful, idealistic, or Utopian aspects of Tolkien’s texts . . . Diaz does not draw on the sense of wonder or redemption that Tolkien sometimes offers . . . Yuniors’ sf and fantasy allusions mostly serve to reveal a fallen world where the marvelous either

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<sup>219</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955.



no longer exists or where what remains of it has been forced into the service of evil. (46)<sup>220</sup>

Yunior is quite blunt in pointing out the crucial discrepancy between his narrative and Tolkien's tale of adventurous Hobbits: "you know what kind of world we live in. It ain't no fucking Middle-earth" (194); Yunior maintains, moreover, that Sauron is not quite as formidable an opponent as Trujillo: "At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken by 'a great wind' and neatly 'blown away,' with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after his death his evil *lingered*" (256), primarily because he was just an agent for the corporate Mordor that keeps steadily increasing in power to this day.

Yet Yunior's allusion to Sauron's final decline is misleading, for at the very outset of the trilogy, Gandalf grimly reminds his listeners: "Always after a defeat and a respite, the shadow takes another shape and grows again."<sup>221</sup> Sauron, apparently, can be temporarily overcome, but he cannot be permanently destroyed. The struggle against ruthless greed and deadly violence goes on and on, for Tolkien as it does for Diaz. This is why Oscar highlights only one section in the final chapter of "A Stronger Loving World," -- "circled one panel three times in the same emphatic pen he used to write his last letters home" -- the one which conveys soberly: "Nothing ever ends" (331). In his essay on the Haitian earthquake, Junot Diaz admits to a sense of weary discouragement, edged with guarded resignation: "Will we, despite all our limitations and cruelties, really heed our ruin and pull ourselves out of our descent into apocalypse? Truth be told, I'm not very

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<sup>220</sup> Bautista, Daniel. "Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 21.1 (2010): 41-53.

<sup>221</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1954, p. 50.

optimistic. I mean, just look at us. No, I'm not optimistic -- but that doesn't mean I don't have hope" (50). Oscar realizes that he has no chance of surviving long enough to form an enduring relationship with Ybon, but he defies death anyway and ends up encountering "The beauty! The beauty!" nonetheless. There is indeed much that is hopeful, idealistic, and even Utopian, not to mention genuinely heroic in what Oscar accomplishes in the end, particularly in the example he leaves for others, for if there is to be any promise of change for the better in human affairs, it surely must begin within each individual. The challenge of inner transformation is especially crucial in Yuni6r's case; Yuni6r's problem is that in certain ways he resembles Trujillo, and therefore he too embodies the fuku, and inadvertently transmits its evil effects:

what [is] really dangerous about the novel, why Yuni6r's such a scary narrator, is because he's so incredibly charming. . . . He's a fucking winner, people like this guy. And he's a horror. . . . the person telling them the story is Trujillo with a different mask. All the stuff that Trujillo believed in, Yuni6r practices in one form or another. . . . his sexual politics are fucking nightmarish.<sup>222</sup>

Yuni6r is a narcissist who considers himself superior to others; he boasts about his physical prowess, and bullies homosexuals to advertize his exceptional virility -- although he is not above hypocritically condescending to befriend Oscar when he receives an unfavorable number in the campus housing lottery: "I actually did it. Move in with him. In fucking Demarest. Home of all the weirdos and losers and freaks and fem-bots. Me, a guy who could bench 340 pounds, who used to call Demarest Homo Hall like

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<sup>222</sup> Miranda, p. 36.

it was nothing. Who never met a little white artist freak he didn't want to slap around" (170). Another reason Yunion suddenly decides to be nice to Oscar is that he hopes it might help him score sexually with Lola; yet he is too self-involved to concentrate on Oscar for very long: "Despite my promises to Lola to watch out, those first couple weeks I didn't have much to do with him. I mean, what can I say? I was busy. What state school player isn't? I had my job and the gym and my boys and my novia and of course I had my slutties" (172).

When Suriyan decides to give him another chance after she catches him cheating, Yunion arrogantly concludes that he must be irresistible: "Dios mio! Some niggers couldn't have gotten ass on Judgment Day: me, I couldn't not get ass, even when I tried" (196). So he just continues his reckless, philandering ways, anxious for an opportunity to add Lola to his steadily lengthening check list of sexual conquests: "it was December. My Indian girl, Lily, was waiting for me back on College Ave., and so was Suriyan. But I wasn't thinking about either of them. I was thinking about the one time I'd seen Lola that year." Lola, however, proves to be more of a challenge than the self-styled lady killer can handle, because she demands a level of commitment that Yunion is not prepared to make, despite the unique attraction he feels for her: "Of all the chicks I'd run up on ever, Lola was the one I'd never gotten a handle on. So why did I feel like she was the one who knew me best? . . . I thought about my own fears of actually being good, because Lola wasn't Suriyan; with her I'd have to be someone I'd never tried to be." Failing Lola's test of personal integrity, however, turns out to be a defeat that Yunion will forever regret: "Why is this the face I can't seem to forget, even now, after all these years?" (198-199).

Junot Diaz explains to Katherine Miranda that “Yunior is haunted by Lola because he knew that if he had revealed himself to her, she would have loved him and accepted him, and he couldn’t do it” (37-38). Yunior rationalizes his inability to remain faithful to only one relationship, claiming that his chronic philandering derives from both his basic biology and his ethnic background -- “you don’t know Dominican men” (175) -- simultaneously making the lame excuse that he is just following prescribed social practice: “At college, you’re not supposed to care about anything -- you’re just supposed to fuck around” (168). He fails to recognize the depth and sincerity of Lola’s affection, even after she aborts the child they could have had together when she discovers that he is still chasing other women.

T.S. Miller contends that Yunior dictates the two sections of the novel that seem to be narrated by Lola: “I understand Yunior as the sole controlling intelligence of the text, and thus I read ‘Wildwood,’ the chapter ostensibly told in Lola’s voice, as mediated through him as well . . . it is as if, in an attempt to understand them, Yunior allows his female characters to speak in their own voices, yet cannot fully surrender control of the narrative” (102).<sup>223</sup> Yet Miller provides no convincing textual evidence that Yunior actually influences Lola’s account. Since Junot Diaz is obviously the author who creates Yunior as the narrator, it is just as possible that he also creates Lola as the sole narrator of the two chapters that he writes from her perspective -- the second of which has no title, appears at the beginning of Part II of the novel, and is only six pages long (205-210). It can be argued that both of these sections actually represent Lola’s personal text, Lola’s

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<sup>223</sup> Miller, T.S. “Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Science Fiction Studies* 38 (2011): 92-114.

lost book, a possibility that is somehow absent from the critical discussion, and yet could and perhaps should be included alongside consideration of Abelard and Oscar's missing manuscripts, Maria Montez's third volume, and the blank page of Balaguer's memoir, as well.

In both of Lola's sections, she is clearly directly addressing someone, and that someone is obviously Yuni6r. Right after relating her mother's hurried admission, "Just know that I would die for you," Lola interrupts her narrative abruptly by interjecting: "But that's not what I wanted to tell you. It's about that crazy bruja feeling that started this whole mess" (72), as if she is recounting the story of her past life to a cherished lover and soul mate. The idea that Lola addresses her account to Yuni6r is even more strongly suggested in the second, shorter section, which opens with an expression of disappointment and betrayal: "Of course I tried once more. It was even stupider than the first time . . . Abuela announced it was time for me to return to Patterson . . . I couldn't believe what she was saying. It felt like the deepest of treacheries to me. I wouldn't feel like that again until I broke up with you" (205). Lola undoubtedly felt that after a lifetime's search she had finally found love she could count on with Yuni6r, for she adds at the end of this section, "It was only when I got on the plane that I started crying. I know this sounds ridiculous but I don't think I really stopped until I met you" (210).

Lola's narrative is quite literary throughout; she switches tenses from past to present and then back again. At the beginning of "Wildwood," the text changes to italics after just one sentence, and for the next three pages reads as if Lola is talking to herself. It appears that Lola is writing after her final breakup with Yuni6r, after her marriage to another man and the birth of her daughter: "Now that I have become a mother myself"

(208). Lola also reflects on her reasons for writing, which also apply to Yunior and to Oscar -- and to Junot Diaz, and to us as readers, as well: “if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (209). Lucia Suarez observes that in recent literature of the Dominican diaspora, including the work of Nelly Rosario and Viriato Sencion, along with Junot Diaz, “the process of writing, for the authors, and reading, for us, actualizes the possibility of mourning.” Confronting past trauma, speaking into the silence produced by persistent denial of individual and collective pain, makes it possible for “authors [to] expose the ways violence, past and present, bleeds into people’s lives . . . stories of survival and narrative restructuring of horrors may be the only route to reconciliation and reconstruction of personal and national memory and integrity.”<sup>224</sup>

Lola’s writing -- whether in the form of a long letter that she actually sends to Yunior, or a “missing” text is not certain -- seems to represent an attempt to create a space for healing of the kind that Lucia Suarez describes, a means of understanding and accepting what has transpired in Lola’s on-again, off-again love affair with Yunior, a way for her to recover from her profound sense of loss and betrayal. Like her brother Oscar, Lola also imagines her writing as a means of rescuing a beleaguered world that is hovering on the edge of nuclear apocalypse: “I would sit in the sand dressed all in black and try to write in my journal, which I was sure would form the foundation for a utopian society after we blew ourselves into radioactive kibble” (65). Oscar considers his writing -- which Yunior describes as “The thing that carried him” (186) -- to be a vehicle for

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<sup>224</sup> Suarez, Lucia M. *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*. Gainesville: Florida U P, 2006, pp. 8-9.

personal recovery and rehabilitation, a zafa for the family curse, as well as a counter spell for the prevailing misery of humankind. Oscar writes on every one of his final days, producing “almost three hundred pages if his letters are to be believed” (320), telling Lola, “This contains everything . . . I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions;” his missing manuscript purportedly contains “the cure to what ails us . . . The Cosmo DNA” (333). The fact that Oscar’s manuscript gets lost in transit implies that other people will have to write an account of their own conclusions -- including Yuniór, and eventually maybe Isis as well. The “cure to what ails us” will have to be rearticulated over and over again, as long as there are human beings left alive to tell the story of their personal encounter with, and struggle against the fuku.

Junot Díaz describes his novel “as a really interesting choose-your-own-adventure book at the level of signification,” and insists that it is crucial for us to ponder the intention behind Yuniór’s narration: “one of the questions that a reader has to ask themselves is: Why is Yuniór telling this particular story? . . . his unspoken motivations . . . are at the heart of the novel and can easily be missed.”<sup>225</sup> It would seem that a large part of Yuniór’s drive to tell this story is his need to mourn the loss of Lola; years after their final separation, and Lola’s marriage to another man -- as well as his to another woman -- and the birth of Isis, Yuniór remains still focused on Lola and on his lingering regrets: “I wish I could say it worked out, that Oscar’s death brought us together. I was just too much the mess.” He appears to have begun to take responsibility for his inconsiderate behavior and hurtful conduct, and to be developing a sense of heightened self-awareness, recalling the events that led to their final breakup: “One day she called,

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<sup>225</sup> O’Rourke, p. 2.

asked me where I'd been the night before, and when I didn't have a good excuse, she said, Good-bye, Yuniór, please take good care of yourself, and for about a year I scromfed strange girls and alternated between Fuck You Lola and these incredibly narcissistic hopes of reconciliation that I did nothing to achieve" (324).

Lola, after all, is far more than what Miller describes as just another of Yuniór's "female characters," since Lola is the one woman he genuinely loves, the one he cannot forget, the one whose loss he never ceases to regret; Lola, along with her brother and mother, remains at the center of Yuniór's concerns throughout the novel. Richard Patteson maintains that Yuniór feels compelled to tell the story of his relationship with members of the de Leon family because that is the only way he can find meaning as he confronts the fact of his own mortality: "For Yuniór, the text represents . . . life; the book he writes is an effort to fill the blank left by Oscar's death" (16).<sup>226</sup> Yuniór is haunted by recurrent dreams of Oscar where "Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look." Like Lola, Yuniór wants to escape, yet soon realizes "the only way out is in":

I want to run from him, and for a long time that's what I do [just as Oscar ran from the sound of Lola's and Beli's screams in his recurrent dreams about the cane field beating]. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (325)

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<sup>226</sup> Patteson, Richard. "Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. *Ariel* 42.3-4 (2012): 5-20.



Oscar's hands are seamless because the story of his life is complete; it is now Yuniór's turn to write his story, create a zafa of his own, just as Oscar did while sacrificing his life to achieve union with Ybon. Patteson pointedly observes, "the man without a face . . . is closely associated with the frightening implications of blankness and erasure" (16), along with pitiless, impersonal death. Yuniór's narrative serves as a means for ensuring his own personal -- one might even argue, his spiritual -- survival, as well as for keeping the inspiring story of Oscar's redemptive sacrifice alive, along with the tale of Abelard's courage, Beli's perseverance, and the love that endures between him and Lola through his connection to Isis: "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7).

Whether or not Yuniór changes in the end from the self-centered, self-serving hedonist he had previously been, Diaz tells Katherine Miranda, is "a very good question the reader has to decide . . . I can't" (37), yet the text presents a strong case that just such a positive transformation does, in fact, occur, due in part to Yuniór's genuine remorse over losing Lola, but also because of the illumination he experiences from contemplating Oscar's selfless example. Diaz contends that:

in Oscar, Yuniór sees something that Yuniór's never had. Oscar is a million things that are fucked up, but he's one thing that is really quite beautiful, really quite luminous, and it's that Oscar's always Oscar. He has an authentic self, no matter how . . . fragmented . . . He's always who he

is. Yunior has only masks. . . . Oscar's always vulnerable, he's always revealing himself.<sup>227</sup>

Diaz elaborates on this point further in his conversation with Joe Fassler: “Yunior has a fascination with Oscar because Oscar permits himself, despite the fact that he has no hope in succeeding, to be utterly vulnerable to the possibility of love. Oscar consistently thrusts himself, places himself, openly, in the hands of other people. In the hands of the women that he thinks he loves and who always reject him. Yunior is fascinated by this because he himself is never able to take off any of the armor, or any of the masks, that a person has to completely take off to expose themselves to the vulnerability of love.”<sup>228</sup> By the conclusion of his narrative, Yunior appears to have learned the lesson that Oscar was trying to convey all along, as when Oscar asks Yunior why he persists in cheating on Lola, and counsels him: “Maybe you should try to find out” (313). Yunior seems to have begun to settle down, by the closing pages, to have finally dropped the multiple masks he always had to wear as a compulsive philanderer, and to open his heart at last to the possibility of an enduring, monogamous relationship with just one woman: “I have a wife I adore and who adores me” (327). In his new life, Yunior is also contributing to the community through teaching and coaching at a nearby community college. He has created a special place in his affections for Lola's daughter Isis, as well, who he treats as if she were his own, and whom he evokes with the New Testament allusion, “Behold the girl,” the precious child who “Could have been my daughter if I'd been smart” (329).

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<sup>227</sup> Miranda, p. 37.

<sup>228</sup> Fassler, Joe. “Men Who Write About Women.”  
<[www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-baseline-is-you-suck-junot-diaz-on-men-who-write-about-women/262163/](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-baseline-is-you-suck-junot-diaz-on-men-who-write-about-women/262163/)>

Daynali Flores-Rodriguez refers to the often cited footnote on page ninety-seven, where Diaz (or is it Yuniors?) describes the relationship between dictators and writers: “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.*” Flores-Rodriguez at first seems to presume that this characterization is Yuniors’s, concluding, “Yuniors criticizes the self-ascribed importance that authors who write about dictatorships assign themselves, and instead poses both dictators and scribblers as competitors, based on the likeness of their objectives. They both want to shape the psyches of those around them.”<sup>229</sup> She then points to the complexity of the novel’s characters as showing that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* rises above this manipulative tendency. Simultaneously, Flores-Rodriguez re-ascribes authorial agency to Junot Diaz, as if the writer and his narrator are, in fact, interchangeable, while arguing that Diaz’s novel likewise transcends the usual moral dichotomies associated with issues of social justice: “By embracing the contradictory nature of his characters, Junot Diaz effectively opens up a third space in the theorization of power in Caribbean literature; he goes beyond the traditional roles of oppressors and oppressed;” in so doing, Diaz “demands from . . . readers an effort to go beyond superficial interpretations of the Caribbean” (97).

From Flores-Rodriguez’s perspective, binaries such as oppressor and oppressed must be regarded as superficial because the real life issues they raise are actually far too complicated: “Experiences of oppression are not meant to be justified or given

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<sup>229</sup> Flores-Rodriguez, Daynali. “Addressing the *Fuku* in Us: Junot Diaz and the New Novel of Dictatorship.” *Antipodas* 20 (2009): 91-106, p. 96.

ontological meaning (as certain dictator novels often attempt) but should be addressed and acknowledged to revoke their hold of Caribbean discourse. Reality will always be more complex than fiction” (104). Flores-Rodriguez presumes that just because, in response to frequently asked questions about the possible correlation between his writing and personal background, Junot Diaz casually refers to authors as people “who basically make their living off of lies,” therefore he must be “rejecting claims to any particular or unique understanding of the Dominican Republic or the Caribbean;” Flores-Rodriguez further contends that the issue of credibility in the novel “is not important because he [Diaz] is lying altogether” (100). This claim is rather astonishing, given Junot Diaz’s explicit comments elsewhere about his strong sense of personal commitment and ultimate purpose as a writer: “I haven’t abandoned the hope that books, as another piece of art, can transform a society or that they can help bring about or participate in a change within a society for better, for more social justice. . . . my work certainly falls within the tradition of writing that is concerned with issues of repression, of social justice, of tyranny,” which is to say, with issues of oppressors and the oppressed. “I always thought writing as truthfully as possible about a period of tyranny, a period of dictatorship, about people who have survived great repression . . . would help people be more human, and by extension of course, would help the cause of peace.”<sup>230</sup>

Lucia Suarez observes that:

Dominican literature has traditionally ignored the violence and strife the country continues to experience. Instead it has focused on romantic, myth-making stories. This is substantiated by the position taken by authors like

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<sup>230</sup> Moreno, p. 1-2.

Julia Alvarez. . . . at a book tour presentation at Duke University in 1998, Alvarez flatly stated that she was not interested in reviewing violence through her work . . . Junot Diaz confronts violence . . . head-on. . . . it is at this pivotal moment of exposure that a new literary tradition is born. (7-8)

Suarez argues that the literary works of this new tradition speak loudly and clearly to issues of social justice, of oppressors and the oppressed, and thus “highlight human hope and resilience . . . they fight for human rights and envision citizenship for all the people of the world” (9). Junot Diaz confirms his clear, resolute commitment to social justice in his conversation with Katherine Miranda, implicitly invoking the innate moral grammar that John Mikhail describes, and that supports the universal ethic that Kwame Anthony Appiah insists is essential for postcolonial studies; as Diaz puts it, in his characteristically emphatic, street-wise phrasing, “we’re worthy of all the things human beings should be worthy of: justice, and fuckin’ fairness and peace and well-being.”<sup>231</sup>

Daynali Flores-Rodriguez’s deconstruction of the binary opposition between oppressor and oppressed ignores the crucial empirical fact that an increasingly tiny and enormously wealthy minority of the world’s population now controls and exploits the vast majority of the planet’s resources, and that it is enabled in doing so solely by means of brutalizing national police forces, along with internationally domineering military machines. Nuclear weapons threatening instantaneous erasure of vast swaths of humanity remain poised to strike as the ultimate instrument of oligarchic terror. The obvious symbolic correlation between Mordor’s deadly winged ringwraiths and real life B-1

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<sup>231</sup> Miranda, p. 32.

Stealth bombers, along with remotely controlled, silent drones, and thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles positioned on hair trigger alert, creates a pall of imminent doom that envelopes the entire globe. The ultra-wealthy classes appear ready to destroy Life itself in their insanely obsessive, compulsive greed for limitless riches. Humankind's long cherished dream of achieving social justice and functional democracy seems to have crashed and burned, with masses of the world's people now entrapped and repressed by a tyrannical plutocracy.

Academic speculation about a "third space for theorization" with respect to historic as well as ongoing savage injustices disregards the desperate screams of the tortured, the hopeless wails of the underpaid wage-enclaved, the despairing cries of countless human beings needlessly dying of starvation and easily treatable illness. As Arif Dirlik has warned, the insidious danger underlying overemphasis on "Theory" lies in the fact that it appears to be "designed to *avoid* making sense of the current crisis" (353).<sup>232</sup> Dirlik regards postcolonial theory that focuses exclusively on complexity and hybridity as seductively "appealing because it disguises the power relations that shape a seemingly shapeless world and contributes to a conceptualization of that world that both consolidates and subverts possibilities of resistance. . . . simultaneous repudiation of structure and affirmation of the local in problems of oppression and liberation . . . have mystified the ways in which totalizing structures persist in the midst of apparent disintegration and fluidity. They have rendered into problems of subjectivity and epistemology concrete and material problems of the everyday world" (355-356).

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<sup>232</sup> Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 328-356.

Failing to account for lived human suffering is precisely David Hirsch's objection with regard to the emergence of deconstruction in Europe following World War II; when categories of good and evil are reduced to matters of semantics, moral relativism is the inevitable result. If the distinction between oppressor and oppressed is obscured, it becomes impossible even to discuss, much less strive for social justice. When the European Holocaust cannot be held up for unambiguous scrutiny and moral judgment, then further and perhaps even worse holocausts are unavoidable. One of the profoundest tragedies unfolding in the contemporary world -- and one of the gravest current threats to world peace -- is the shameful treatment of Palestinians by the former victims of Nazi terror, as the latter persist in appealing to their own past trauma while continuing to inflict needless suffering on subaltern Others.

Simon Gikandi relates how F.R. Leavis "created a grammar" that articulated "a generalized moral condition" for all peoples of the world, based on principles expressed in the great works of English literature. According to Gikandi, Leavis conceived of English language and English culture as being "integral to a certain moral vision," one founded on values that are "uniform, inherent" in all human beings, and that remain "unaffected by local circumstances or histories" (627-628).<sup>233</sup> It is reasonable to assume that these values would include widely recognized human virtues such as courage, compassion, kindness, generosity, and selfless sacrifice, which seem to be universal values that are shared equally across all cultures and historical periods. Leavis's idea is compelling, except that he makes the crucial error of associating this universal moral

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<sup>233</sup> Gikandi, Simon. "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality." *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2005.

code exclusively with one particular language and one individual culture, surely for purely chauvinistic reasons. Yet Leavis's underlying, implicit idea of a universal moral grammar makes a great deal of sense, and corresponds well with the precepts articulated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Kwame Anthony Appiah's call for a universal ethic, and what John Mikhail and other researchers are currently discovering about the uniform, inborn moral intuitions that inform all human beings.

Junot Diaz follows in the tradition of literary artists who articulate such universal values, and who dedicate their literary efforts, in various cultures and languages, to the cause of urging respect for basic human rights. As Diaz has maintained repeatedly in numerous interviews, literature can help people become more fully human, enhance awareness of our common humanity, and inspire a sense of enduring fellowship and solidarity. Literature can promote the highly desirable goals of global democracy, social justice, and world peace; one could well argue that these goals are not only desirable, their realization is essential for ensuring human survival. The shared human values and ethical principles implicit in these goals contains the essence of what Oscar means when he tells Lola she does not realize "all that is at stake," as he willingly sacrifices his life for the sake of love, consciously following in the footsteps of the "the first intellectual who made the word become flesh" (39).<sup>234</sup>

Literary critics enjoy a unique privilege as intellectuals, working with language while analyzing and interpreting literature, which contains a timeless treasure trove of intuitive understanding and ineffable wisdom. Yet literary critics need to guard against

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<sup>234</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. "For Peace, Justice, and Culture: The Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century." *Profession* (2006): 33-39.



self-exaltation, choosing abstract theorization at the expense of recognizing the responsibility that comes with their privilege -- the duty of furthering the human values that literature embodies and represents. Like Arif Dirlik, David Hirsch, Sandra Cox, and many others, Ngugi warns against a tendency in the contemporary academy to “shy away from engagement with words like *freedom, liberation, social justice, peace, and nuclear disarmament* and to retreat into modern scholasticism where splitting hairs about form takes precedence over content” (39). The preponderance of critical commentary on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to date, unfortunately, seems to reflect just such a tendency, insofar as many critics prefer to emphasize how the text supposedly “deconstructs” and “undermines” itself, leaving what Diaz describes as the “lessons of the novel” somehow ambiguous and uncertain. To the extent that there may be validity to such arguments on a strictly theoretical level, these issues might be interesting to consider, but such abstract speculation should not distract from close attention to the stirring claims about human rights and social justice, as well as the grave warnings about serious threats to continuing life on this planet, that Junot Diaz’s fiction urgently and obviously strives to convey.

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Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT		
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<b>Phi Beta Kappa</b>		1970
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### Teaching Experience

<b>Adjunct Professor English Department</b>		
Three Rivers Community College, Norwich, CT		2013-Present
<b>Adjunct Professor/Teaching Fellow English Department</b>		2006-2012
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA		
<b>Adjunct Professor Graduate Education Program</b>		
DeSales University, Center Valley, PA		2005-2007
<b>Adjunct Professor English Department</b>		2005-2012
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<b>Instructor Continuing Professional Development</b>		Spring 2005
Colonial IU 20, Easton, PA		
<b>Adjunct Professor Education Department</b>		2004-2006
Northampton Community College, Bethlehem, PA		
<b>English Composition and Prose Writing Tutor</b>		2004-2005
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<b>Tai Chi and Medicinal Chi Kung Instructor</b> Senior Citizen Centers, and various convalescent homes in the Hartford, CT Area	2002-2004
<b>Tai Chi and Chi Kung Instructor</b> Manchester Senior Citizen Center, Manchester, CT, and Healing Therapies, LLC, Tolland, CT	2002-2004
<b>Tai Chi and Kung Fu Assistant Instructor</b> Malee's School of Tai Chi and Kung Fu, Manchester, CT	1994-2004
<b>English, Science, and Math Teacher</b> Hartford Secondary Public Schools, Hartford, CT	1994-1996
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<b>English and Reading Teacher Grades 5-8</b> Organized school newspaper, literary magazine, guitar workshop Fairfield Country Day School, Fairfield, CT	1978-1981
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## **Publications**

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