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Immigrants and Galactus: Junot Diaz's  
World in *The Brief Wondrous Life of  
Oscar Wao*

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**Immigrants and Galactus: Junot Diaz's World in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* represents the new aesthetic of a globalized discourse. It is the story of a Dominican immigrant family and their trials throughout the decades. Oscar de Leon lives in New Jersey with his mother Beli and his older sister Lola. He is obsessed with comics and science fiction and as a result is not popular and has no luck with women. Diaz says at the opening of the book, "Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about" (p. 12). In a culture where he is expected to be highly masculine and sexual dynamo, Oscar chooses to live his life with his comics and Dungeons and Dragons.

One might expect a typical immigrant story written in standard American English. However instead of adapting the dominant conventions of the western narrative, Diaz's novel is a mix of high and low culture, academia and pop, Spanish slang and standard English and everything in between. He does not privilege any one of these discourses over another. Diaz expresses the reality of the modern immigrant through a mix of images from all over the social spectrum. This collage breaks down the hierarchical structures implicit in the privileging of certain languages and cultural references. The narrative is disjointed, full of events with many interpretations, sometimes using language very few readers will understand. This creates a new reality, aware of itself as a result of history.

*Oscar Wao* is also the story of Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic and the atrocities he committed. Diaz internalizes the mayhem done to the Dominican people so that he can joke and play with the facts. This creates a natural narrative that

reflects the dialect and discussions of the time, while still educating the reader on the history of Trujillo. The fragmented history lesson, which is full of more hearsay than historical dates, better reflects the tragedy than past immigrant narratives. While many immigrant authors have adopted the dominant discourse of the official culture, which insists on a value judgment of language and information, Diaz brings all the references and stories he can to create a collage that more accurately reflects the modern multicultural world. This is no longer the self-contained, hierarchical pure first world narrative, but a new mixed up, disjointed, aesthetic.

Marginalized communities deploy vernacular and slang to simultaneously express their unique reality and create a new one. Their world cannot be captured in “standard” English. Every marginalized community has invented new words or new uses for older words. Communities form a second language separate from the dominant primary one. The dominant society often appropriates the marginalized community’s language for entertainment. This utilization can be seen in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vaudeville Theater featuring the humor and language of the Jewish community or in the use of African-American slang in popular media today. However the validators of official culture usually do not encourage the use of slang, ranking people according to the way they speak. Those who use the vernacular of a supposed “lower” culture are separated out and often seen as outcasts. Classifying people according to their use of vernacular helps the dominant society retain power. Those who can reproduce the dominant discourse are seen as intelligent and worthy, while those who use a different vernacular are alienated. Society loses the benefit of multiple perspectives when those who do not conform to the standard language are ignored. Language becomes an organizing tool for the oppression

of minority communities. The struggle for power is played out through the language practices of the society.

The language in literature has always been used to define “high and low” forms of art. Often the language of the immigrant is seen as a lower form of communication. This is true for the actual language of the country the immigrant is coming from (e.g. Spanish from the Dominican Republic) as well as the language developed by the immigrants in their communities (e.g. Spanglish slang used in Dominican areas of New Jersey and New York). These immigrant cultures have often been the victims of colonization and have to struggle to forge a new identity. While some try to maintain their previous traditions, others choose to adapt the language of their colonizers. Often the story of the immigrant turns into the plot theme of the victim. Books such as Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* paint the picture of immigrants who are unable to fend for themselves. They are the victims and the world is responsible for their suffering. These books are written in standard American English and do not adapt the language and story arcs of their own culture. Instead of getting a multinational narrative, the reader receives a story that is written like a classic American tale, with characters from another culture.

Diaz does not adjust to accommodate the reader, but instead forces the reader to make meaning from all these discourses at the same time and see into his reality. The result is the subversion of the power hierarchy of knowledge. Cicero, Stan Lee, *The Sound of Music*, and Spanish slang are all written into the same sections, without privileging one over another. Instead of being preoccupied with Oscar’s outsider status, the victim story of the immigrant, Diaz has demanded that his truth, his reality, is the

central story. In the end, his use of multiple languages makes the novel a story of redemption and re-appropriation of power and agency for the Dominicans.

The narrator for the majority of *Oscar Wao* is Oscar's college roommate, Junior. His name is spelled Yuniór in order to force the reader to pronounce his name the way the people in his community would. The reader must go into Diaz's world or not experience the book at all. Yuniór serves as interpreter of what is going on. Through him, Diaz deploys a varied group of references and languages. These references often invoke the science fiction and fantasy worlds Oscar is interested in. When describing how physically weak Oscar is, Diaz will say he "had like a zero combat rating" (p. 15). This refers to the ratings a character may have in a role playing game, combat referring to their fighting skills. Although it is not imperative for the reader to know this to fully understand Oscar's life, these touches give dimension to Oscar's world.

In another instance, Diaz describes the history of turbulent relationships between dictators and journalists, "Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've [dictators and writers] had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Deathstroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio" (p. 97). Unlike the previous quote, Diaz now uses enough references that there is at least one that each reader can understand, as well as another one that each will not understand. While some may know who Caesar and Ovid are, they may not know the history of the X-Men or the boxing feud between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. This passage is confusing in some way for every reader, but that is his goal. Diaz wants the reader to feel as though he or she does not understand something, as that is the way most people – especially immigrants coming

into a new world and a new language – live their lives. Instead of using references only an educated readership would know, he uses icons from all over the cultural spectrum. The text does not make one reference more important than another. This breaks down the hierarchical structures put in place that rank art as high or low culture.

These references are not random. They help build the reader's understanding of Oscar's world. These are the icons he interacts with in his world. Some are his interests and some are just parts of pop culture that are filtered to most people. The result is a better understanding of the community Oscar and Yunió exist in, without directly writing about the community itself. Information is taken in equally, not ordered by its social and intellectual importance. This free flow of unordered information reflects the way people receive and process knowledge. Díaz's references do not feel formalized or forced, but instead seem natural. He had to internalize these references in order to not simply regurgitate them, but to be able to play and joke with them. The result is a natural narrative without the uncomfortable formalism often associated with novels that use numerous references and languages.

The use of Spanish in the book prompted complaints from some critics. Díaz does not insert footnotes or explanations of what these words mean; he simply puts them in for the reader to try to digest. Some of the Spanish he uses is relatively simple such as, "Y el Dentista?" (p. 94). However sometimes he inserts Spanish in a key passage, such as when Lola returns from the Dominican Republic with new found confidence when her mother Beli remarks, "Coño, pero tu si eres fea" (p. 208). A straight translation would be, "Damn, but you are ugly" but that misses some of the idiomatic meaning. This passage is what breaks Lola back down after she has regained her confidence in the Dominican

Republic. It reflects Beli's cold attitude toward her daughter, and misunderstanding it obscures the important relationship between Lola and her mother.

Even if the reader understands standard Spanish, the amount of Dominican slang is too much to fully understand without delving deep into the culture. When Beli reaches puberty the boys start to notice her, calling out, "y ese tetatorio" and "que pechonalidad" (p. 93). These are not formal Spanish words, but twists on standard words (pecho meaning chest and teta meaning nipple or breast). It does not matter that the reader probably will not comprehend these words. The slang serves to put the reader into the world of the characters, while also simultaneously refusing to adapt in order to be more understandable. Not including translations has frustrated many critics who feel they are missing half the book. However the book is still successful without the reader understanding every word, as the experience of not understanding, of being on the outside, adds to the depth of a world filled with outcasts. Diaz noted, in an interview that aired on October 18th 2007 on NPR, that the experience of not understanding these Spanish words or other references directly reflects the experience of the immigrant or ELL (English Language Learner) student. While it is interesting to entrench the reader in a well fleshed out, complex world, it is remarkable to simultaneously give the reader the experience of the characters.

Spanish is not the only other language spoken in *Oscar Wao*. Yunior uses slang native to New Jersey and New York in all his descriptions. He refers to Oscar as a "domo" (p. 180), a slang term used to refer to Dominicans. Oscar uses his own form of foreign languages when he speaks to Yunior in college, "*Speak, friend, and enter. In fucking Elvish!...Actually, he coughed, it's Sindarin.*" (p. 172). From street slang to

languages that are not actually spoken, Diaz employs numerous types of discourses. These are the ways of communicating people are given, through pop culture and school, through neighborhood vernacular and peer groups, through media and family. This paints a more realistic picture of life and more fully brings the reader into Oscar's world.

Diaz pairs images of superheroes and science fiction characters with the nature of being an immigrant. Oscar tries to escape his life through these fantasy worlds, but they also inform his immigrant experience. These heroes are outcasts, weird compared to the social norm. But instead of looking funny or using a different language, these heroes are approaching the level of gods. Oscar can relate to their outsider status while enjoying the fantasy of being god-like. However as he grows up he becomes interested in more complicated narratives. While still considered part of the "dork" culture, pieces such as the comic *Watchmen* and the anime *Akira* are far more sophisticated and deal with deep philosophical problems. In this way, the cultural references serve to mark Oscar's growth. The reader cannot fully understand Oscar's maturing without some knowledge of these pieces of art, but Diaz knows that for many immigrant and bilingual families, reading a "standard" piece of American literature presents the same sort of problems of misunderstanding.

One theme Diaz continually returns to is the history of the Dominican Republic. He says in his first history discussion that this is for "those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (p. 2). In an interview on NPR, Diaz explained that he had to read hundreds of books about the Trujillo regime, as well as ask Dominicans for local stories. He described how he had to internalize all of their stories as if they were his own in order to play and joke with the facts. To explain atrocities to the

reader is one thing, but for the characters to be so used to dictatorship that they joke about murder and torture is much more powerful. He refers to Trujillo sometimes as the “failed cattle thief” or “T-zillo” (p. 110). When describing Trujillo’s attempt to kill the Venezuelan president, Romulo Betancourt, Diaz writes in a footnote, “The bomb, packed into a green Olds, blew the presidential Cadillac clean out of Caracas, slew the driver and a bystander but failed to kill Betancourt! Now that’s *really* gangster!” (p. 110-111). While some may see Diaz’s reference to surviving an assassination attempt as “gangster” as disrespectful, he is simply speaking in the dialect of a time and place. The word “gangster” in this context means strong or resilient. Diaz internalized the information given to him and wrote about it in a conversational way, allowing the reader to be entrenched more deeply in the story.

While this footnote is already an aside, Diaz deploys an aside within parenthesis, “(Venezolanos: Don’t ever say we don’t have a history together. It’s not just the novelas that we share or the fact that so many of us flooded your shores to work in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties. Our dictator tried to slay your president!)” (p. 111). Even more conversational than the joking, the narrator is getting distracted by other issues while he is already in a footnote. While most of this section is about Beli and her budding love affairs, Diaz inserts a history lesson addressed to the reader as if they were talking over dinner. He creates a narrative with a distinct dialect and set of references, and although readers may not understand all of it, they are sucked into his reality. In addition to fleshing out his world, by using this kind of loose narrative, Diaz is rejecting rules for how to write and how to lead the reader.

In addition to casually talking about historical events, Diaz uses fantasy and comic book references to create a caricature of Trujillo. The atrocities he committed were so horrifying the only comparisons that can be made have to be taken from the fantasy world. The science fiction and fantasy worlds deal in absolutes: absolute good and absolute evil. In this way they are the perfect references when trying to describe an evil dictator. Diaz writes, “In some ways living in Santo Domingo during the Trujillato was a lot like being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode that Oscar loved so much, the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world” (p. 224). Diaz goes on to describe how the episode is exactly like what Trujillo did to the Dominican Republic. Diaz is raising a television show to the status of history. While this is a common practice in conversation, it is often looked down upon in literature. But Diaz legitimizes pop culture, breaking down the borders between what is important and what is not. He goes on to compare Trujillo with Dr. Gull in *From Hell* (p. 224), a reference to the famous Alan Moore comic that depicts the murders of Jack the Ripper. Trujillo is simply an evil character to be played with. But Oscar’s world is very real, as it reflects the collage of images the modern person takes in everyday. When this concentrated, almost cartoon-like, evil is juxtaposed with these very real characters, the reader can better understand the horror of the dictatorship.

When Trujillo is finally assassinated Diaz writes, “At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken away 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*.” (p. 156). Diaz uses this as a

preface to all the atrocities committed after Trujillo's death. He is not taking the subject matter lightly by referring to *The Lord of the Rings*, but instead is staying within his own reality to discuss a world that is close to him. Instead of seeming completely out of place, it feels as though the story would have been told incorrectly without the reference. In fact, Diaz' demonization of Trujillo to the point of comparing him to a fantasy character is not foreign, as he puts a quote from the Dominican news paper *La Nacion* at the beginning of Part II, "Men are not indispensable. But Trujillo is irreplaceable. For Trujillo is not a man. He is...a cosmic force...Those who try to compare him to his ordinary contemporaries are mistaken. He belongs to...the category of those born to a special destiny." (p. 204).

The main plot of *Oscar Wao* deals with the trials of Oscar's family, yet Diaz gives the reader a better feel for the Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic than books devoted to the period. While many immigrant narratives create characters that are simply victims, often historical narratives fail to synthesize history with the personal stories of the characters. Diaz directly criticizes another historical narrative when Beli is being shunned by her classmates for being too dark, "It wasn't like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor scholarship student. No Miranda here: everybody shunned her." (p. 83). This insistence on reality, not cliché plots passed down by the colonizers, puts Diaz in a different class of author. Trujillo's world is tangible in *Wao*, but it is only conveyed through side notes and hearsay. This sort of scattered narrative creates a more realistic picture of historical events.

As well as referencing objects from all over the hierarchical spectrum, Diaz conveys most of the story through what others have said. Every story Yunior tells is just

something he hears and it is up to the reader to believe it or not. This leads to Yuniors talking about the Dominican Republic and New Jersey through a variety of sources. From Chinese restaurant owners to Dominican gangsters, all of their stories and sentiments are examined. There is substance and reality to their characters. Diaz gives the life story of the gangster, a man who uses and almost kills Beli when she is young. He chronicles the gangster's rise to power under Trujillo, even down to the details about his remorse after the revolution in Cuba. His relationship with Beli is no longer just about an evil man using a young woman (though it is also that), but it is about him trying to rebound from his failed job in Cuba. He is a sad man who has spent much of his life running whorehouses and the only way he knows how to comfort himself is through women. He may not be a character the reader sympathizes with, but his motives are explained and his character fleshed out.

Diaz exists within a contemporary global arts movement centered on the fusion of images from all social contexts. Chicano artist Enrique Chagoya's collection *Borderlandia* reflects similar themes to those found in Diaz's work. He describes his art as, "a conceptual fusion of opposite cultural realities that I have experienced in my lifetime" and "collisions between historical visions, ancient and modern, marginal and dominant paradigms." One example is a piece which depicts Superman, wearing a cowboy hat, talking to a character from Aztec drawings, with an alien flying in the right corner. In another entitled *Hand of Power*, a huge Mickey Mouse hand is emerging from an ocean of blood, spewing oil. This work deals with the same themes and ideas as *Oscar Wao*. There are images from high and low culture, and different historical periods, pieced together in a way that does not privilege one over another. The complex identity of the

modern world, created by immigrants, is articulated through a mix of references from all over the social spectrum. This creates a new reality, aware of itself as the culmination of its past. It mirrors Diaz's focus on people as a result of their history. Chagoya states his work is, "The result is a nonlinear narrative with many possible interpretations." This is similar to Diaz's insistence on many interpretations of his text and the fractured nature of his narrative.

It is not a coincidence that these two artists are using almost identical aesthetics in different mediums. Diaz and Chagoya exist within a contemporary movement looking to change the story of the third world and the use of post-modern imagery. Diaz meant for there to be a comic book section to *Oscar Wao*, so the use of images is close to his thoughts. This is only the cusp of a movement that is relatively new, but other artists such as Daniel Guzman create a collision of images with many interpretations. One of Guzman's creations is a scarecrow made out of an old transistor radio, vinyl records, a shirt, a pair of pants, and a Mexican boxing mask for the head. He says this is his take on "the New Fire," an Aztec ritual involving human sacrifice. These artists do not exist in a vacuum, instead reacting to and interacting with the world around them. The hierarchy-breaking aesthetic of blending images from all over the cultural spectrum can be seen in every form of art. Music artists such as M.I.A., who blend beats and politics native to the third world with hip-hop, electronica, and rock, are part of the same movement. Even the Oscar winning film by Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*, shares the same aesthetic as Diaz and his contemporaries. This is a movement that could only happen at this point in history. Just like the images and characters in their art, they are a result of what came before them and the images that surround them.

Diaz's insistence on a focus on Dominican history explores the nature of time in the story. As with the unsympathetic gangster, each person in this story is the culmination of his or her past. That is why this is still the story of Oscar, even though he appears in less than half of the narrative. His family and the politics that surround them culminate in Oscar becoming who he is. By telling the stories of Beli and Abelard (Oscar's grandfather), Diaz helps the reader understand how a life is the culmination of extraordinarily unlikely circumstances. The stories Oscar read and the movies he watched further fill out his world. He is also the result of hundreds of years of colonization and exploitation. Not only does his placement in America mark this, but also others' hatred of his dark skin reflects the years of conditioning that dark skin equals evil. The mixing of all these elements creates a world, a reality, within which Oscar exists.

Diaz refuses to give a one sided narrative in which there is an all-knowing narrator. There is not one version of reality. Instead Diaz provides accounts of situations from many points of view. When Beli is beaten in the cane field she is half alive, drawing life from the fact that she had been wronged by the gangster (like Superman draws life from the sun in *Dark Knight Returns*, another comic book reference) and Yuniór tells the reader, "And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your watcher has his silences" (p. 149). The watcher is a race from the *Fantastic Four* that is committed to observing and recording every piece of knowledge in the universe. Yuniór compares himself to the watchers on a few occasions. In this instance he points out that even a being whose responsibility is to know all can have holes in his knowledge. In this way the watcher can be seen as the figure of the author, as Diaz chooses not to

reveal a singular truth in his narrative. Yuniór goes on to describe how a golden mongoose told Beli of her future and that she must get up and move on. There is no proof of this incident. It is up to the reader's trust in the extraordinary. Díaz is telling the story as a possibility. Beli could have escaped the cane field through luck, but that depends on the reader's belief in luck or fate. When describing a Trujillo arrest, Díaz uses another Dominican slang term, "It sounds like the most unlikely load of jiringonza on this side of the Sierra Madre. But one man's jiringonza is another man's life." (p. 235). One must approach real life in the same way. There are no right answers, only faith that one way is on the correct path.

The idea of *fukú americanus* is central to understanding both the many possible explanations of events in the text and the extensive past given to everyone and everything. Díaz discusses *fukú* in a preface to the story. *Fukú* is a curse passed down through the family. Many consider its origins in the first conquest of the Americas and the importation of slaves from Africa, "carried on the screams of the enslaved" (p. 1). People stayed away from houses that had experienced *fukú* related misfortune. *Fukú* comes from somewhere, whether it is family or an action someone carried out. Díaz says the readers do not have to believe in *fukú*, they can simply believe in a series of bad luck. But no matter what one believes, these events are real and have to come from somewhere. *Fukú* can be seen as the embodiment of colonial oppression, an explanation to rationalize the horrors visited on colonized people. Whether they are a culmination of colonial and other historical forces or just *fukú* does not matter; these causes are interchangeable. What does matter is that they came from somewhere and one must trace back to their origins in order to obtain full understanding.

Just as the past is always clouded, the future is always uncertain in *Oscar Wao*. The story ends with Yunior telling the reader about the two dreams he has after Oscar's death: one where Oscar is holding up his finally finished book in joy and another where he is a faceless man and Yunior wakes up dreaming. This is the nature of the story and of Diaz's world in general. There is no guarantee for the future. The story is never fully completed, as Diaz places hints about Lola's daughter's future life and what will happen to Yunior at the end of the novel. Before Oscar dies, he sends a package of all he has written, all the things no one has read. The package is never received by anyone. This is a further representation of the limitation of our ability to comprehend and decode everything. It is legitimate to partially know something as nothing can be fully grasped. Knowledge is always unfinished. The reader has learned about the past and knows the events leading up to this uncertain future. Yunior leaves the reader with a quote from what many consider to be the best comic book of all time, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*. Oscar has circled the panel over and over with the same pen he used to write his letters home, "Veidt says: 'I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.' And Manhattan, before fading from our Universe, replies: 'In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.'"

This is also reflected in the form of Diaz's ending. After a chapter called "The End of the Story," Diaz inserts a blank page, followed by Yunior reassuring the reader that the story is almost done as he wraps up a few more loose ends. But after another blank page Yunior returns to give the reader a little more wisdom from Oscar's final letter. The book's reluctance to end reflects the actual lack of ending in real life. There is always more to tell and more to say.

*Watchmen* deals with the issue of a person being the culmination of their past as well. Dr. Manhattan, a man who has become a cosmic being able to comprehend everything at once, only sees the beauty in human existence when he realizes the hundreds of thousands of coincidences that make up every person on earth. The most amazing thing about every person is the sheer improbability of their life. This is the fact Diaz insists on highlighting.

*Oscar Wao* does not end with death and sadness, but in an expression of the beauty of the world. In his final letter Oscar describes when he finally lost his virginity and all the little intimacies he did not know about. The book ends with Oscar writing, “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (p. 335). With one last reference Diaz is turning the ending to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* on its head. While this book is filled with torture, murder and treachery, for Diaz this is all just part of the human circus. He unapologetically represents the horrors of reality, without turning away from the gruesome details as many immigrant and historical novels do. In *Heart of Darkness*, seeing the evil in the world leads one to believing the world is filled with wickedness and “horror.” However instead of giving up on mankind, Diaz is encouraged by the characters’ existence in spite of their trials. All the events leading up to Oscar’s life created and shaped him. Just like in *Watchmen*, the most amazing thing in the world is the existence of life. The sheer improbability of one’s life, with the collage of people and events that must come before it, makes life the most extraordinary thing there is. In the end the fact that any of us actually exists is a beauty in itself.

While Diaz acknowledges the pain that goes on in the world, first and foremost is the wondrous existence of life. Diaz opens the book with a quote from the all-powerful being from the *Fantastic Four*, Galactus, “Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to Galactus??” The novel answers that question, showing that everything one does is the culmination of a million different improbabilities and social phenomena.

Just as everyone is a culmination of his or her past, *Oscar Wao* is a culmination of Diaz’s experience and knowledge. Everything in the book points to something in the real world for signification. The name of the book comes from the Ernest Hemingway short story *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. Even Oscar’s nickname, Oscar Wao, comes from him being called Oscar Wilde by his classmates (a joke that he is homosexual), but their accents change Wilde to Wao. It is in this moment of mispronouncing that Diaz’s world exists.

Diaz speaks for the immigrant community, but also for his own interests (comics, pop culture, Dominican history, etc). In one’s accent a unique world is created, and he pulls the reader deep into this reality. This is a narrative unlike any other as it pushes both the post-modern and immigrant narrative to new levels, creating a new globalized aesthetic. *Oscar Wao* is perfectly complete in its incompleteness.