

“Trawling in Silences”: Finding Humanity in the Páginas en Blanco of History in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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“But my own imagination works on your absence
as if it were a blank sheet of paper.”

From Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*

Junot Díaz’s novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, invents a world where curses, or *fukú*, explain Trujillo’s reign and its fearsome terrors.¹ Moreover, the novel presents its readers with a world where the eponymous young Dominican-American nerd-writer does not succumb to fear to pursue love. Through the motif of the *página en blanco*, or the blank, white page, Díaz’s primary narrator, Yuniors, uses the metaphorical empty spaces or gaps in history as a Muse for imagining and telling personal and collective histories. Díaz’s narrator authors the life of the eponymous Oscar, which must include Oscar’s maternal origins in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. Revealing layered narrations and ideas of play, Díaz’s novel is his narrating character’s creation. The writer Yuniors documents the oral testimonies of the two de León women and reconstructs the lives—not the literature—of two dead authors: Dr. Abelard Cabral and his grandson Oscar de León. At one point, the self-reflexive Yuniors confesses he doesn’t have all the facts or information about his characters, when he writes, “[w]e are trawling in silences” (Díaz 243). On four occasions, Yuniors references the *página en blanco*, or the blank page, which becomes a trope of silence, particularly the silence imposed by totalitarian regimes. While the *páginas en blanco* calls attention to absences, anxiety, and silences, they also invite the imagination to prosper and explore a world of narrative possibilities. Yuniors, our narrating author, knows that fiction does not require any evidence or literary antecedent: *fiction cannot be discredited*. Truth must be imagined in Yuniors’s narrative because none of Abelard’s and not all of Oscar’s writing survives as evidence. I posit that *the página en blanco* serves as an alternative

space and a physical site for representing the human imagination and its desires in a variety of ways. The black ink printed on the novel's white pages counters unwritten, missing, silenced, and destroyed accounts and testifies to the desire for self-articulation. *The página en blanco* reminds us of all we do not know and marks the unwritten potential of the human imagination.

Díaz's blank pages and the novel as a whole become counter narratives, which resist the imposed, monolithic narratives manufactured by dictators and their tools.

Dictators and other totalitarian regimes usurp the history of a people by writing their version of an official national narrative and calling it "History." The novel challenges notions of history as linear, singular, or objective in its homage to a variety of genres of diverse regional origins.² Díaz's literary work not only rejects a singular lens of one genre and point of view for re-imagining history, but refutes the historiography of dictators by weaving in the "authorial voice" in footnotes with his characters' voices and genres in the text recognized as the novel. In an interview with O'Rourke, Díaz says he creates what he calls a "double narrative" where "[t]he footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me" (O'Rourke n.p.). This "double-narrative" extends to the notion of writing on the *página en blanco*, or blank page, as a counter narrative to historical silences.

From the novel's margins, Díaz's authorial persona criticizes history's omissions and selectivity: "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality" (Díaz 2 FN). The author-persona speaking from the footnotes, that is to say the marginal space *below* the main text, exposes and criticizes the politicized nature of history.³ A nation's dictator chooses a narrative that paints the

official national portrait, and First World nations, supporting these regimes, must select which European nations' histories will be part of curriculum and which indigenous and colonized histories will be omitted. However, the voice from the margins also implicates his ill-informed readers to reveal how gullible we are. How easily we accept what an author tells us. In this way, the author-persona comments further upon the dangers of both dictators and authors when his author-persona aligns the two in one of his lengthier footnotes:

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

The homage to writer-in-exile, Salman Rushdie, reminds Díaz's readers of both the real *fatwa* and the power of the printed word.⁴ Such a threat on the author Rushdie's life and those associated with him also publicize that fear: readers may believe in and take truth from the works of authors' imaginations. The author-persona in the footnotes playfully acknowledges that, like a tyrant, he brings his bias and version of history to the table; in good humor, Díaz's novel gives a nod to the *novela del dictador* literary tradition of verbally indicting despots and their 'official' histories in fiction.⁵ Moreover, tensions between literature and history are accentuated in *Brief Wondrous Life*. First, the footnotes reject a historiography of dictators' subjectivity. Next, they also reject the impersonal, attendant objectivity of history put forth by Leopold von Ranke in the nineteenth century. Traditionally, European historians, like Ranke, sought to show history "as it actually happened," or *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Dictators and colonizers do not tell history as it happened, but as they want it told; such official, national narratives serve the despots' agendas, which make them their personal versions of a country's history. However, as Díaz's novel

illuminates, history is personal. Literature is personal too, and it need not be the marginal cousin to history whose traditional use of footnotes does not make the historical narrative truer than fiction. Drawing from historical and literary margins, the novel's narrator and author-persona carve out a place for multiple lenses and literary traditions to fill in the silences and empty spaces in history created by that singular authoritarian voice of historians, dictators, and even novelists. While I read Yuniors as a character and narrator of Díaz's invention, the irreverent voice of the speaker in the novel's footnotes shares the tone and argot of both the narrating-author-character Yuniors and Watcher-narrator Yuniors.⁶

The extensive use of digressive footnotes continue to raise the question of which text is the focal point—Yuniors's narrative or the "author-persona's" footnotes. These footnotes must be read as a companion to absent texts or silences. When their length and almost audible outrage exceed their place in the margins, these notes compete with the narrator's tale of Oscar and his family. I find Díaz's use of the footnotes in *Brief Wondrous Life* analogous to the shifting use of negative space in visual art from secondary to primary focus. His novel's footnotes perform a critical role of filling in his readers' educational gaps by showing us where those empty spaces in history have been artfully concealed with an official narrative. Furthermore, the novel's footnotes invite the idea of play found in metafiction and parody footnotes' traditional function in historical documents and in literary criticism as a space for expounding and commenting on historical references.

While these footnotes do educate, they also pun on their alleged secondary nature in their length and tone. For instance, in one of his lengthy footnotes, Díaz's author-persona subjectively comments upon his epithet of "Demon" for Joaquín Balaguer, a poet, confidante to El Jefe Trujillo, and former president of the Dominican Republic, who wrote a memoir entitled,

Memorias de de un Cortesano de la Era de Trujillo with a single empty page.⁷ First, the irreverent tone of this particular passage is not unique to the novel's footnotes, but it enunciates the speaker's narrative bias, through parody, that history is not and never was objective. Although the author-persona would "rather piss in [Balaguer's] face," he is compelled to explain that Balaguer strategically "left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say *impunity?*") (Díaz 90 FN). The rhetorical question plays with narrative subordination where parentheses contain information unworthy of emphasis; however, this parenthetical aside highlights the value of expressing one's opinion when there is a history of being silenced. Once again, things are not what they seem: Díaz's novel plays with the ironic shift of the traditionally less significant—footnotes and parentheses—to their symbolic significance. Balaguer's *página en blanco* becomes a very real and imagined space; it is an artifact of imposed silence that reminds us of all we do not know but yearn to know.

This footnote passage is also exemplary for showing the novel's preoccupation with silences and its trope, the *página en blanco*. An empty space, or a kind of negative space, Balaguer's self-styled, stark white page proposes his memoir's incompleteness without the murderer's name. The white page reminds its readers of an ironic, illusory democratic desire to name. While the blank page marks a site for naming the true murderer of the journalist Orlando Martínez, Balaguer's page hints at the memoirist's imagination: he imagines himself paradoxically as both a truth-seeker and above the law. Moreover, he also dares investigators and historians to name Martínez's murderer, which Díaz's footnote accomplishes, punning on Balaguer's place in history. The novel's footnote then becomes the real space for calling out Joaquín "Demon" Balaguer as a likely suspect for murder. Often thought of as national and impersonal, "History" becomes personal histories in the realm of fiction.

Imagining the multitude of individual perspectives inspires Yuniór to write and acknowledge his limitations as a writer and as a human being. While he paints himself as a cocksure macho, he does not profess to know everything his characters endure, particularly Oscar's mother Hypatía Belicia "Beli" Cabral de León. One of the most compelling stories originates from Beli who is not a writer but a survivor of the *Trujillato*. Rescued by her father's cousin La Inca, Beli never talks about what Yuniór calls her "Lost Years," but bears their "terrible scars on her back" (103). Although La Inca and Beli have "their very own página en blanco," their verbal silence is countered by the real scar and text of Beli's burned back (78). With burns caused by a foster father's pot of hot oil and a later beating by one of Trujillo's subordinates, Beli has been objectified as a body and not a person at the violent hands of these men. While her scars testify to her personal history, her silences testify to her trauma and powerlessness under the hyper-macho terror of the Trujillo regime. Beli's life, as Yuniór tells it, reminds readers of the power of dictators and its patriarchy to silence. To write these personal histories gives a voice to the disenfranchised, particularly to the violated woman living during the *Trujillato*. The novel imagines a kind of social and historic justice that the Trujillo regime denied its nominal citizens who in fact became very real citizens of a Dominican diaspora.

In addition to the footnotes' aperture on history, historiography, voices, and silence, the novel's characters are created by Díaz who suggests that they in turn are imagined by his first person narrator "Yuniór." This narrator's name is mentioned for the first time more than half-way into the novel (169). He never tells us his full name, but he informs us that the eponymous Oscar knew it: "he'd been excited, kept calling me *by my full name* until I told him, It's Yuniór, Oscar. Just Yuniór" (my emphasis, 189). While we are unclear of the narrator's motives to forgo mentioning his birth name, we know that as a writer, who narrates his complicated friendship

with the de León siblings and their family history, he *becomes* Yuniór in the inviting, narrative space of the white pages. Yuniór narrates himself into existence just as he fashions and renames the eponymous hero of Oscar Wao, né de León. While at Rutgers, Yuniór describes how his roommate Oscar got his mutated name:

When I saw [Oscar] on Easton, with two other writing-section clowns, I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, *quién es Oscar Wao*, [...]. (180)

Even if Yuniór has lived in the dormitory for writers, he seeks to distance himself from the non-macho Oscar who, according to Yuniór's vivid descriptions, looks nothing like Oscar Wilde. He reveals his own knowledge of British literature, but he has yet to self-identify as a writer, which would align him with Oscar. The non-combative Oscar allows the name to stick when he responds to it. Instead of correcting Melvin, Yuniór adopts the nickname that will make his story's outcast evolve as its true hero. *Brief Wondrous Life* calls attention to the writer's process of invention and imagination and uses the metaphorical, yet real, blank pages to narrate the process of fiction.

These epithets function not only in the characterization process but in exposing the relationship between the nameless and named, the universal and individual, destabilizing the focus on the positive space onto the negative space. Before the novel's narrator has revealed his name to be Yuniór (169), he has already referred to himself twice as "your humble Watcher" (4, 92) and "your Watcher" (149).⁸ As a narrator who revisits the history of the Dominican Republic and records the de León family history, Yuniór admits his unreliability, "[e]ven your Watcher has his silences, his *páginas en blanco*" (149). Here, the ever complicit reader accepts the

narrator's words as a version of the truth. As humans we know that we cannot know everything. Not only does our narrator question his knowledge and authority on his topic, but he invites us to play along with him. Moreover, this specific epithet of Watcher aligns the narrator with his knowledge of comics, particularly *The Fantastic Four*. In Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's Marvel universe, Watchers, a fictional extraterrestrial race, are bound to an oath of non-interference with other species. Yet a Watcher named Uatu breaks his vow to help the heroic Four and the Silver Surfer defeat the villainous Galactus and protect earth.⁹ Like Uatu, Yuniór's persona moves between worlds, but Yuniór moves between the literary and historical.

As a writer honing his craft, the nearly anonymous Yuniór designates himself as the novel's Watcher. At first this handle suggests his assumed position of non-interference as our Watcher, but, as our novel's narrator, he re-imagines his narrating role as a kind of breach or intervention in the life of the de León siblings and in the narrative space. While the novel's early pages identify our narrator as our Watcher, its first epigraph cites Galactus, a dictator-like figure. Speaking of himself in the third-person, Galactus asks the Watcher, "Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus??" A fictional alien tyrant, Galactus poses a question that mirrors dictators' indifference to the lives and stories of ordinary people. Within the question is the ellipsis, marking a rest—or a space—for silence, and its rhetorical tone assumes a kind of silence will follow until these lives' existences can be justified. Symbolically, Díaz's novel becomes a kind of response to that question and asserts that, although brief and anonymous, lives are important to those who lived them. Within the *mise-en-abyme* of the novel, the Watcher-narrator, or Yuniór's alter-ego, responds *with* the stories of Oscar de León, his family's, and those from the Dominican diaspora. Aligning himself with the redeemer Uatu, Yuniór must intervene to name and tell Oscar and his family's story because their written legacy has been

destroyed by the Trujillato. While we have Yuniór's artful reconstructions of Oscar's life, the true accounts of Oscar de León's life and those of his mother and grandfather are the ultimate *páginas en blanco*. "Oscar Wao" in name and story are Yuniór's creations, but our narrator imagines the real stories of a nameless, dispossessed people. The blank pages simultaneously remind us of narrative silences and an alternative to those silences: the white page is both the negative space and site for writing fiction. In the space of once-white pages, Yuniór narrates, or writes, to salvage the stories, which are the lives of the de León family.

The importance of these "brief, nameless lives" is one side of the proverbial coin and telling those stories is the other side. From our close readings, we affirm the power of writing and the fear of the written word in the author-persona's commentaries on Balaguer and the similarities between writers and dictators. Calling attention to the various *páginas en blanco* in the de León family histories, the narrator plays the role of the writer-biographer whose duty is to tell their stories. The ink of the novel's printed pages counters missing, silenced, and destroyed accounts and testifies to the desire for self- and collective-articulation; these imagined, marginalized personal histories become the highlighted negative space and the metaphorical footnotes that displace a dictator's "History." Where the literature of history may fulfill its purpose as totalitarian propaganda, it has failed its people and their personal histories.

When literature adopts the lenses of metafiction, historical fiction, sci-fi, dictator novel, magical realism, and comics, it becomes a viable alternative to History's "single voice" and to silence's *páginas en blanco*. Yuniór's narrative is an amalgamation of all these genres because he has more in common with Oscar than he wishes to admit. "[N]ot entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation," Yuniór calls Oscar's story a "Fukú story" (6). In order to tell Oscar's story, Yuniór must return to the fukú and its roots in the Dominican Republic because

“[i]t happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around [his] throat” (6). Díaz’s Dominican-American narrator informs his readers that, prior to the trend of ex-Trujillo lackeys’ “tell-all books,” Oscar’s maternal grandfather, Dr. Abelard Cabral, was writing a book “of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime” (246). Although Yuniór appropriates the attendant premise of Abelard’s book for his own novel, he traces the root of the family curse (*fukú*) to the first writer in the de León family. A writer, Dr. Cabral reputedly blends the historical with the supernatural and inspires his grandson and Yuniór to write books that require multiple lenses. The “ghetto-nerd” Oscar writes to invent alternative universes in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and super heroes, while the macho Yuniór adopts the urban vernacular, or his brand of McOndoism, to write about the supernatural in this world, a personalized magical realism.¹⁰ Critic Daynalí Flores-Rodríguez posits that Abelard “effectively precedes his grandson Oscar as a sci-fi writer” (99); I would argue that Abelard, more accurately, precedes Yuniór as a writer of the Trujillato and its lore of linking it to the supernatural.

Díaz’s narrator seizes the opportunity to re-imagine Abelard’s destroyed writings, which could testify to the power of the Trujillo and his panoptic, supernatural-like qualities. Since Abelard’s writings do not survive, Yuniór must convey Trujillo’s villainy in his own lingua franca: pulp villains. Allusions to Tolkien’s Sauron and Jack Kirby’s Darkseid permit readers to imagine the fictional but real evils of Trujillo and his regime. If official History is written by those in power, it comes at the expense of the unofficial, oral—and written—histories of those not in power: the people. Maintaining the idea that dictators fear writers, Yuniór lets his readers know that all of the printed pages in Abelard’s house were obliterated:

Also strange that none of Abelard’s books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive. Not in an archive, not in a private collection. Not a one. All of them

either lost or destroyed. Every paper he had in his house was confiscated and reportedly burned. [...] I mean, OK, Trujillo was thorough. But not one scrap of paper with his handwriting? That was more than thorough. You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that. But hey, it's only a story with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd could love. (Díaz 246)

Not only are Abelard's writings erased, but the writer is later imprisoned; arrested for slander or for not delivering his eldest daughter (dubbed by Yuniór as "The Girl Trujillo Wanted"), Abelard's family is cursed and silenced. His legacy consists of the fukú, his orphaned youngest daughter Belicia Cabral de León, his grandchildren Oscar and Lola, and the destroyed books, which become the metaphorical *página en blanco* (216). Even without facts or "solid evidence" of Abelard's writings, we are compelled to believe Yuniór's version as the truth; within these empty narrative spaces, or *páginas en blanco*, we are able to imagine the power of a dictatorship to silence and erase histories. Conversely, we imagine, with Yuniór and Abelard, the power of writers to displace dictators. Books, as real symbols of ideas, are powerful weapons; *fatwas*, censorship, and book burnings occur under monolithic regimes that fear the democratization of ideas. The destruction and erasure of written pages, such as Abelard's, are examples of censorship; these censored, destroyed pages, not blank themselves, *become* lacunae and blank pages as later generations try to re-visit and reconstruct the past. Again, Yuniór participates in the tradition of the *novela del dictador* that challenges dictators' singular, official "History." He marks these blank pages with his ink and the desire to tell the truth, however incompletely or inaccurately.

While commenting on Abelard's destroyed books, Yuniór also expounds on the power of writing, particularly the influence of the printed page. Although no overt comparison to

Shakespeare's Prospero is made, Abelard's power—and doom—lies in the books he owned and wrote. Magic, like fiction, requires collaboration between its author's and readers' imaginations. If we, the readers, doubt the supernatural aspects of Oscar's story, which is Yuniór's *fukú* tale, then we question the magic of fiction. Yuniór calls attention to this collusion when he writes:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a *fukú*? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here. (243)

If an official "History" written by despots and their henchmen dishes up uncertainty, it is not the fault of the fiction writer; the uncertainty and absence of answers becomes the narrative inspiration for up-and-coming writers like our narrator Yuniór. He continues to weave the thread of silence as an absence of knowledge and as recognition of an imperfect knowledge. A tonal reverse of silence, not knowing permits unrestricted narrative potential on the nascent novel's blank pages. We do not necessarily read fiction for facts but for the possible and probable, which may also seem impossible or improbable. The use of "we" echoes of the informal author's "we" and hints at that necessary collaboration between author and reader; the narrator wears the hat of an author of a *fukú* story who needs his readers to suspend disbelief for 335 pages. Just because a narrative falls under the diverse category of fiction, it does not make the story less true.¹¹ "A thousand tales I could tell you about Abelard's imprisonment [...], writes Yuniór, alluding to the storyteller Scheherazade (250). He too *could* tell us any number of tales, which points again to narrative potential of silence. The writer's role then is to imagine history as it may have been and to sow seeds of inquiry in the readers.

While the lives of Belicia and her father Abelard provide us with a context for understanding Yuniór's *fukú* story's origins in the Trujillato, the story of Oscar's life and death

reveal something about Yunior and his development as a writer. Our novel's unlikely hero, Oscar, is a prolific writer, albeit an unpublished one. When he and Yunior are roommates at Rutgers, Yunior admits he "picked up his writings, five books to date, and tried to read some," but it "[w]asn't [his] cup of tea" (173). In the novel's final pages, we learn that Oscar has sent a package from the Dominican Republic to his sister Lola in New Jersey before he is killed; arriving eight months after his death, a mailing with a manuscript of his "E.E. 'Doc' Smith-esque space opera called *Starscourage*" and a letter to Lola alerts her to a forthcoming package, which "contains everything [he has] written on this journey" (333). But this second package and its contents never arrive, leaving Lola and Yunior with Oscar's *páginas en blanco*—what has yet to be said and in Oscar's voice. If Yunior's tale calls attention to the negative space of missing texts, his narrative becomes a text of triumph: he becomes a writer whose text survives and sees publication. His writing is inspired by missing manuscripts and the silenced, imprisoned writers of the Dominican Republic. Like Sheherazade, he knows he can tell thousands of tales to fill some of the void, but his tales do not complete the *páginas en blanco*.

Through the absence of Abelard's and Oscar's writings, Yunior's narrative comments further on the nature of history: without extant first person narratives or other manuscripts, a complete or *bona fide* history is impossible. In its lifetime, housed in the body, a mind's life is not always revealed to us because it is silent or has been silenced like Oscar's not once but twice. Oscar is murdered; his writings are lost and unpublished. Yunior, a writer and now-archivist, holds on to Oscar's earlier works to be read perhaps one day by Lola's daughter, the fourth generation de León. Victims' histories as *páginas en blanco* are always missing from the narrative, but are re-imagined by survivors who desire narrative and truth over silence and censorship.

Creating characters who narrate orally and textually, Díaz puts forth a novel whose truth rests in the horrors of the *Trujillato*, his characters' heroic passions and humanity, and the *páginas en blanco* of history. While Yuniór passes on the stories, or testimonials, of Lola and Belicia de León, he really honors his eponymous character whose quest for love and truth get him killed in the post-Trujillo, yet still corrupt Dominican Republic. The narrator describes Oscar as a "hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, [who] believed that was the kind of story we were all living in," which justifies both Yuniór's and Díaz's Tolkien and Herbert references (6). Using stark contrasts between himself and "our hero" (9), the narrator also calls Oscar "a Caliban" (170) and a "dork." Yuniór's use of Caliban here carries a load of negative connotations: one who is oppressed, weak, and Other.¹² However, since Yuniór's narrative pays homage to Oscar and his "brief wondrous life," his print text acts as a testament to Oscar's real power: Yuniór becomes a disciplined writer who, like his hero, is versed "in Genres!" and writes about this marginalized Oscar (17). Unlike the brutal, oppressive power of dictators, the real power of ideas and feelings touches us on a human level.

On a cultural level, individuals may inherit beliefs and values that divide people into categories by gender, ethnicity, color, and even superstitions. These values are not limited to dictators but are exhibited as bigotry on the individual level. The Cabral-de León family is the subject of gossip and Yuniór's *fukú* story; according to Yuniór, the lives of these individuals testify to extreme bad luck passed down through several generations. Through Yuniór's narrative of multiple lenses, Oscar's bad luck is of extraordinary proportions. Unlike our narrator, Oscar is most unlucky with women, love, and sex. Moreover, Oscar's hyperbolically dark skin acts as disturbing superficial evidence of his misfortune. In fact, the narrator makes numerous references to Oscar's inherited black skin as a kind of curse. Blackness, gentleness, and lack of machismo

become superficial markers of our hero's otherness in Yuniór's tale. Playing with images of black and white, Yuniór describes the blackness of the de León bodies against the contrast of the blank white pages. For instance, he notes that Oscar and Lola inherit their mother Belicia's blackness and the Dominican prejudices that come with it. His description is hyperbolic, but conveys an otherworldly image of blackness linked to superstitions:

And not just any kind of black. But *black* black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaiblack, zapotblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen. (248)

While gossip and gossip of curses might spread quickly, people who believe rumors and curses write off those associated with omens, curses, and bad luck. The afflicted—whether by real or imagined blights—are erased as individuals with lives and marginalized as another cautionary tale. They are dehumanized as stereotypes. Though in stark contrast to the *página en blanco*, one must ask if blackness and the de León characters' black bodies hint at a blankness—that is to say, silences and stories we must imagine or try to imagine. When ordinary persons and their lives are silenced or forgotten, their lost stories point to a lack of agency and a narrative blankness. Although Yuniór dismisses color as an omen of doom, he does see the truth in such culturally inherited prejudices and injustices, which have real, bigoted social consequences.

Attention to color reminds readers of another way in which Dominican and hyphenated American identities are constructed through comparisons and ethnic stereotyping. In the Dominican Republic, blackness surfaces, albeit inaccurately, as a marker of ethnicity. Sharing the island of Hispaniola with Kreyol and French-speaking Haitians, the Dominicans believed their neighbors to be the blacker island residents. To be Haitian or dark-skinned in the

Dominican Republic under Trujillo would have been perilous and culminated in the historic massacre of 1937. In a footnote, the author-persona clarifies that, after the 1937 massacre, fewer “Haitian types” worked in the Dominican Republic; the Cabral family servant Esteban El Gallo was an exception because he “looked so damn Dominican,” which means brown-skinned, or *moreno* (218 FN). The superficial and unreliable marker of skin color becomes the false litmus of national identities. So the dark-skinned Oscar’s Dominicanness is called into question on several occasions. While at Rutgers, “[t]he kids of color, upon hearing [Oscar] speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican. And he said, over and over again. But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy” (49). Finally, to be called Haitian in the de León family is an insult of skin color and ethnicity. After spending a summer in the DR, Oscar returns to Paterson a bit darker: “Great, his tío said, looking askance at his [Oscar’s] complexion, now you look Haitian” (49). Yuniór’s point of view calls attention to the various readings and misreading of his de León characters’ hyperbolic blackness. While these bodies have found their way on to the white page, they have been silenced by the bigotry of the Trujillo era and its lingering legacy of prejudices. Adopting conventions of fiction, Yuniór also endorses exaggeration as a tool against the silence of Trujillo’s dictatorship. Oscar’s extreme blackness, uber-dorkiness, and hyper-romantic qualities act as counterpoints to the violence and corruption of dictatorships; these extremes function as necessary tools for memorializing those forgotten by history. Oscar’s disenfranchised black body represents the black ink needed to tell the story on the white pages.

Trujillo’s reign of terror is described as a supernatural, yet real, dark period: “A great darkness descended over the Island...” (156) Clearly, the era of dictators has real outcomes, but writers borrow from and embellish with literary comparisons. Drawing from the negative

descriptions of darkness or blackness in literary works such as *The Tempest*, *Dune*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Dark Knight*, Yuniór's numerous allusions to blackness and darkness are understood as metaphors of ill omens, evil, otherness, and even ugliness. The reference to the tyrannical DC Comics character Darkseid is associated with Doom and Darkness as he tries to take over the universe and free will; another reference to Darkness is found in a footnote about equating the Dominican Republic and the Third World with the DarkZone (92 FN); finally, both Oscar and his mother are brutally beaten at night, in the Dominican Republic, under the cloak of darkness and in the cane fields. Bad things happen in dark places. While literature and its repetitive motifs of light and dark may operate as metaphors or symbols for good and evil (beautiful and ugly), we, as gullible readers, may even be swayed by these devices. It is possible that Díaz's novel asks us to question the bigotry Oscar endures and to question the fictional universes where light triumphs over darkness. Both Yuniór and Díaz (the novel's author) flip all these negative connotations of Oscar's blackness, or "blankness," as goodness.

The reader understands that the bullied, beaten, and albeit imperfect Oscar represents—universally—everything good. Unlike the spiteful, mystical character of Caliban, black Oscar is pure, honest, and idealistic. Arguably he is re-imagined as a new world amalgamation of Caliban and Prospero. Like Caliban, he learns a particular language—literary genres, films, and games—and is subjected to the bullying and tyranny of those abusing their power. Yet Oscar understands the magic and power of words and the imagination like Prospero. While Prospero renounces magic with his staff and book, Oscar, risking his life, conquers his fear and the family curse in pursuit of love. As the novel's sole hero, Oscar possesses an unwavering idealism in pursuit of true love and his passions for fantasy, sci-fi, and writing that Yuniór initially lacks. Oscar gives his otherwise "brief, nameless" life importance and meaning when he writes passionately and

pursues Ybón's love. Professor Lyn Di Iorio Sandín comments on the imagined and revised meaning of Oscar's death: "It is the transformative and sacred power of death that makes the live Oscar, seen by Yunior and other Latinos as a loser, a romantic hero" (28). Oscar stays true to his quest and to himself. While certain truths may not be possible in real life, the vehicle of fiction imagines redemption and metes out justice where history fails. The 'truth' of fiction allows its *mise-en- abyme* of author and characters to respectively create and inhabit worlds where things might have been different.

This fictional biography expresses an imaginable desire to negate the dystopian reality of Trujillo's dictatorship where those silenced could not speak and to resituate a silenced history in the present. Lives must be lived and lost to fill in the *páginas en blanco*. Moreover, genre blending, the vernacular, historical references, and literary allusions remind us of the need for a variety of lenses because of language's—and more importantly—and History's inadequacies. Writing too, with its black letters on a white page, might be honored for what the letters or characters attempt to say—however imperfect, but for the partial truths conveyed. Although blank, white pages can be filled; they remind us what remains unsaid or unwritten. The act of writing, or the act of making the imagination physical, is a meta-narrative of what has not been said: there will always be blank pages. And there will always be readers and writers who will attempt to solve the mystery or find a way to make the abstract and the ideal physical. Negative space of silences and footnotes become more than artifices of narrative composition because they simultaneously draw attention to and attempt to fill in the empty spaces of the *página en blanco* as a site of silence and narrative potential. For example, as characters who are survivors, women, and non-writers, Lola and Beli de León are not the authors of their own stories, leaving the readers with some of the more interesting yet problematic *páginas en blanco*. Continued

imbalances of power and contemporary cultural biases about gender and color leave us with noticeable gaps or silences in history and its narratives. Still “trawling in silences,” Yunió acknowledges the incompleteness of his tale and its imagined narrative potential, when he writes: “I’ll give you what I’ve managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en blanco* finally speak” (Díaz 119). Although humanity will never fully unearth all of History’s *páginas en blanco*, its storytellers and writers will not rest as they attempt re-imagine and discover truths. Only when we question History as the record of “as it actually happened” will we be blinded by the glaring reality of the *página en blanco*, which is the missing records and silenced perspectives. While trawling for individual stories and their truthfulness, Yunió understands that truths and stories have been buried with the victims of History and its singular voice. More importantly, *Brief Wondrous Life*, through its characters and narrator, appropriates the emptiness of the white page to assert literature’s role to break the silence with black ink. In this essay’s epigraph, Alvaréz’s narrator re-envision the negative space of “a blank sheet of paper” as a positive space for the imagination to create and write. For Yunió, Oscar’s death and missing literature are the absences that propel Yunió to “wonder” and write about his peer’s extraordinary life and their Dominican history; the missing pages result in a novel. Although silences and empty pages may call attention to oppression and censorship, they are not dismissed or forgotten when they inspire the humanity and imaginations of writers.

Notes

¹History wields its influence in and continues to inspire literary works. Julia Alvaréz has written two novels inspired by the gaps in history from the Trujillo era: *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000). Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) memorializes both dead and living Haitians in the aftermath of the 1937 massacre. See a special issue of *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 20 (2009) on

“Trujillo, Trauma and Testimony,” for several seminal articles on literature about the Trujillo era which include the novels mentioned above and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

² In a relatively recent article, Monica Hanna recognizes that Díaz’s novel “show[s] a thematic interest in questions of historiography, particularly in relation to the nation in diaspora” (517FN). She astutely comments upon the historical nature of the novel’s footnotes, which “emphasiz[e] the quotidian and lived experiences over what are traditionally considered historical events, providing a popular view to counter the official view” (502). While I agree that Díaz’s novel’s footnotes proffer another lens for revising practices of historiography, their significance begs closer attention as they often dominate the page, purposefully engage the main text, and highlight a keen use of negative space.

³ I will call the voice speaking from the margins (footnotes) the “author-persona” who provides his authorial commentary.

⁴ To put it mildly, the publication of Rushdie’s novel *Satanic Verses* (1988) was not well-received by Muslims and by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. Khomeini’s response to the novel resulted in the 1989 *fatwa*, a religious edict, which still stands after his death; supporters of the *fatwa* believe Rushdie’s novel insults the Prophet.

⁵ Examples of the *caudillo* or dictator novels from the Latin American Boom of the 1960s-1970s include Gabriel García Márquez’s *El otoño del patriarca* (1975), Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel *La ciudad y los perros* (1963), and other novels by Carlos Fuentes and Alejo Carpentier. These novels commented upon and challenged dictators and their myopic agendas. Vargas Llosa’s later novel, *La Fiesta del Chivo* (2000), carries the torch of revisiting history written by dictators. However, the author-persona who speaks from Díaz’s novel’s footnotes criticizes Vargas Llosa for painting a kinder portrait of Balaguer, one of Trujillo’s top officials and later president of the Dominican Republic (Díaz 90 FN).

⁶ Since Yunior is a budding Dominican-American author with a *fukú* story to tell, he could be the author of his footnotes, or not. Díaz’s novel blurs these boundaries as it does with other boundaries that question the “certainty” of events. Parallels between Yunior and Junot Díaz can be drawn and have been drawn by scholars like Ignacio López-Calvo who argues, in his article “A Postmodern Plátano’s Trujillo: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, more Macondo than McOndo,” that Yunior is Díaz’s “literary alter-ego”(84), but rightly wonders if Yunior’s footnotes are in fact Díaz’s (78). I would also agree with López-Calvo’s observation that Díaz’s use of footnotes evokes those employed by Jorge Luis Borges.

⁷ First published in 1988, Balaguer's memoir notes, "Esta página se inserta en blanco. Durante muchos años permanecerá muda, pero un día hablará, para que su voz sea recogida por la historia. Callada, coma una tumba cuyo secreto a voces se levantará, acusador, cuando el tiempo permita levantar la losa bajo la cual permanece yacente la verdad" (333). The 1989 edition leaves the verso page blank (334).

⁸ In an interview with *Bookslut's* John Zuarino, Díaz comments on one of the novel's epigraphs: "And what's interesting about this [opening quote] is that the person that that's being asked in the comic book is the very character whom the narrator, Yuniór, takes on as his narrative alter-ego, his nom de plume" (n.p.). While we have established Yuniór's role as Watcher and see the novel's title is a modification of the epigraph, the persona of the Watcher allows him to marry the lenses of comics with literature and history.

⁹ In this same footnote, Díaz acknowledges his "shout-out to Jack Kirby" of Marvel comics. Readers of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's *The Fantastic Four* would be familiar with the double nod to Kirby and Lee's genre and their practice of addressing their readers in comic-styled footnotes; see March 1966 issue #48 of *The Fantastic Four* called, "The Coming of Galactus!" for a footnote from "Stan" (16).

¹⁰ "I am not a magical realist!" is the title of Chilean-born writer Alberto Fuguet's 1997 piece from Salon.com. Here, Fuguet discusses American writers' expectations for him to write like a Latino who employs "the flying *abuelitas* and the obsessively constructed genealogies" (n.p.). Fuguet explains his neologism: "Unlike the ethereal world of García Márquez's imaginary Macondo, my own world is something much closer to what I call 'McOndo' -- a world of McDonald's, Macintoshes and condos" (n.p.). Employing a prismatic literary lens, Díaz's novel permits the exploration of the complex family trees found in magical realism and adopts the urban argot affiliated with Fuguet's McOndoisms.

¹¹ First published in 1974, Hayden White's important essay, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," shines a light on the similarities between history and literature:

But in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (White 82)

Historical texts as "verbal fictions" cannot be definitive if they are invented and imagined, nor are they truer than their literary counterparts.

¹² The non-macho Oscar has been called a dork numerous times by our narrator (17, 68, 169, 171, 183, 268, 288, 321). The narrator uses “Caliban” as a slur to describe two characters as “losers.” Yunior calls the Gangster, Belicia’s lover and Trujillo henchman (124) a Caliban and, later, Oscar (170). Clearly, Caliban alludes to the enslaved, colonized character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, who curses his tyrant Prospero. The well-read Rutgers educated writer, Yunior, alludes to the Bard’s Caliban and his mutated pulp offspring. While postcolonial allusions are evident, Yunior makes it clear that he is equally familiar with comics, science fiction, and fantasy as Oscar is. In Marvel Comics’ *Uncanny X-Men*, Caliban is an albino, mutant outcast. Known for his *Dune* series, Frank Herbert creates an extra-terrestrial, stellar species called Caleban [sic] in the novel *Whipping Star*.

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