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Abstract

This thesis investigates Junot Díaz’s portrayal of the Dominican diaspora in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to propose that Junot Díaz’s understanding of belonging approaches Giorgio Agamben’s concept of community as a being together of individuals in an inessential solidarity. The novel presents the marginalized Others of the Dominican diaspora as individuals whose longing for a sense of community problematizes the notion of bounded physical and temporal loci. The characters are never only of one nation or one culture, neither can they be identified as representing a singular race, class, religion, gender, or sexuality. Rather, they occupy multiple realities across contingent temporal registers so that errancy, mutability, and ambivalence characterize their transcultural experience of the quotidian. This being in flux opens liminal spaces from which they can grasp potentiality to refigure the past and interrupt the performance of the present for cultural renovation. Through the lens of Oswald de Andrade’s cultural anthropophagy and postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, this thesis discusses the ways in which Díaz’s text engages readers to re-examine normative paradigms of belonging to imagine sustainable commonalities that do not evince an essence.
Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, and independent work by the author.
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For Torin, Seamus, Erin, and Mirin
Introduction

What is a community? As we navigate what Ulrich Beck (1999) calls a ‘world risk society’, the effects of globalization and the circuitous migrations of peoples across socio-political and cultural borders challenges the assumption that belonging requires the affirmation of a cohesive collective identity founded on an immutable essence.¹ Thus, defining the term ‘community’ has become problematic across disciplines. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1994), “The sociological content of community has remained a matter for endless dispute . . . [as] there is no clear and widely accepted definition of just what characteristics of social interaction constitute the solidaristic relations typical of so-called communities” (72-73). Reflecting the conundrum of sociologists, there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of community within critical theory. Those who espouse Marxist theory eschew the notion that community is about culture rather than economic relationships. In addition, for many postcolonial theorists and poststructuralists, the idea of community as an idealized affirmation of a stable and essential identity belies the irreducible nature of subjectivity.² These critics argue that the notion of community is founded on criteria of inclusion and exclusion so that individuals can be identified and differentiated, which has become the cause of violent conflict throughout history. Thus, Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an act of collective imagination is problematic as the national community is imagined to be confined within exclusionary political

¹ Beck insists that in the shift from industrial to risk societies the negative effects of modernization are distributed across socio-political and cultural borders with unpredictable consequences for the present and future global community: “It is the accumulation of risks—ecological, terrorist, military, financial, biomedical and informational—that has an overwhelming presence in our world today . . . with only three possible reactions: denial, apathy and transformation” (“Incalculable Futures” 80).

² I am referring to writers such as Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Aiwa Ong, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, for example.
Echoing this debate within critical theory, the novel has begun to transcend borders as many authors have adopted more cosmopolitan perspectives in their writing. Junot Díaz (1968), a Dominican-born writer residing in the United States and the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), problematizes the idea of community as a cohesive essence by presenting characters whose commonality transcends fixed borders. However, while scholars continue to write extensively on this novel, there is no published discussion to date on the text’s engagement with Giorgio Agamben’s theory of community. I hope to contribute to the dialogue on Junot Díaz’s work by proposing that as a leading contemporary visionary of community theory, Agamben offers further insight into Díaz’s transformative text. This thesis investigates Díaz’s portrayal of the Dominican diaspora in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to support my hypothesis that his understanding of belonging approaches Agamben’s concept of community as a being together of individuals in an inessential solidarity.

In *The Coming Community* (1993), Giorgio Agamben rejects any concept of community that imagines a unified and continuous collectivity founded on an exclusionary identity. He views the traditional concept of belonging as an imposition of a false sense of shared understanding that silences differences, and insists that a viable community thrives on the notion of belonging without an essential identity. This alternative community embraces both the conflictual and convivial relationships of singularity “mediated not by any condition of

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3 In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson describes the novel as a “means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (36). Thus as a genre, the novel is restricted to reinscribing the essence of a national identity and the boundaries of the nation rather than transcending these borders to imagine the world (30).

4 Here I refer to the novel since the advent of present globalization defined by Pheng Cheah as a consequence of “the intensification of international trade, fiscal and technology transfer, and labour migration . . . and the rise of global hybrid cultures from modern mass migration, consumerism, and mass communications [which] since the 1980s have combined to create an interdependent world” (17).
belonging ... nor by the simple absence of conditions ... but by belonging itself” (85). Belonging then loses its rootedness in identifications of race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, and sexuality and concerns itself with the solidarities that cut across these imagined borders. As a result, borders become porous with a flux of open subjectivities, both individual and collective, that defy categorization. Furthermore, as an assemblage of singularities that are not “united in essence but scattered in existence” (19), the community is "without either representation or possible description—an absolutely unrepresentable community” (25). The community eludes representation because it is never a fixed and passive site of belonging but a process where being is always a becoming that undermines the notion of a body politic. In this way, the process of a deracinated belonging opens up the possibility for new concepts of self while negotiating interactions with similarly engaged singularities. Agamben calls these singularities “whatever singularities” whose community is not mediated by any condition of belonging, such as being Muslim, French, or Communist, nor by the absence of these conditions but by “being such as it is” (1). Therefore, ‘whatever being’ indicates a singularity that is loved for its own sake and not for its individual qualities or its belonging to a general category:

Love is never directed to this or that property of the loved one (being blonde, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one with all of its predicates, its being such as it is. The lover desires the as only insofar as it is such. (2)

In other words, what matters is how individuals live as opposed to what individuals are. Thus, being is a pure singularity—neither universal nor the essence of a particular identity—that makes possible a human community as a being together of individuals in an inessential solidarity (18).
In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz presents communities in the Dominican diaspora as sites of cultural flow where individuals participate in a hybridization of culture. Their syncretic commonality is tied neither to traditional discourses of the family, culture, and the nation nor to a politics of inclusion in a multicultural society. Rather, they negotiate the temporal and physical spaces of their environment as continually morphing beings whose constant mobility thwarts any attempt to classify them as belonging to an identifiable social group; that is, the protagonists’ cultural hybridity precludes any intention to identify a singular race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or sexuality as the basis of their commonality. As they traverse the diaspora, the characters occupy various liminal spaces between imposed socio-cultural and political borders that open up possibilities for realizing a viable sense of self. These interstitial sites of becoming foster horizontally engaged processes that counter any elite cosmopolitanism which seeks to replace the fraught nature of human interaction with a harmonious ideal. The novel’s irreverence for the notion of fixed identities and belonging within closed collectivities invites the reader to contemplate cosmopolitanisms that approximate Agamben’s idea of community as an assemblage of ‘whatever singularities’.

As Agamben’s concept of ‘whatever singularity’ provides the theoretical basis for this analysis of Díaz’s understanding of community in *Oscar Wao*, the focus of this thesis is the novel’s portrayal of an inclusivity that reconciles the particular with the universal. Each of four chapters examines different socio-cultural, linguistic, and literary aspects of the novel to determine the extent to which Díaz’s view of community coincides with Agamben’s theory. The first chapter discusses the effects of the physical and psychic displacement of the protagonists whose traumatic past haunts families across generations. How do these marginalized individuals negotiate agency despite the limitations of imposed narratives of identity? In this discussion, I
refer to Homi Bhabha’s and Agamben’s treatment of time to show how Díaz’s characters experience the quotidian across temporal registers. As time is non-linear, histories of dispossession become multiple and interdependent thus facilitating the creolité Édouard Glissant describes as a process of infinite metamorphosis. The second chapter focuses on alterity in diasporic communities. This chapter examines the mechanisms of hegemonic discourse that divest the characters in Oscar Wao of political agency while they maintain the potential for constructing a workable sense of self. I look to Homi Bhabha’s study of cultural stereotyping and fetishism, Judith Butler’s treatment of gender, and Julia Kristeva’s concept of the feminine abject to investigate the ways in which Díaz’s text supports Agamben’s understanding of homo sacer. 

In the third chapter, my analysis of the novel’s hybrid form through the lens of Oswald de Andrade’s theory of cultural anthropophagy reveals how linguistic and literary intertextuality writes the fractured diasporic community. I show that the text’s resistance to present and past narratives of oppression becomes a counter-narrative that makes possible what Agamben calls the grasping of potentiality in kairological time. The fourth chapter explores how the characters’ marginal positionings in the diaspora require a crossing of borders that undermines any official discourse of belonging that hopes to maintain them. I suggest the protagonists’ cultural fragmentation in the constant inter-contamination of cultures gives rise to an ambivalence that allows for the possibility of transcending borders to forge new mutable and complex identities. Here, I refer to Fernando Ortiz’s theory of transculturation and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s consideration of the flux of identity in the Caribbean ‘meta-archipelago’ as points of departure

Kairological time is from the Greek word kairos, meaning a moment of time in which all times converge and everything happens at once. Unlike chronological time, which is quantitative and linear, kairological time is qualitatative and cyclical. In kairological time, for instance, one eats when one is hungry and not when the clock determines it is time to eat. It is a time consisting of moments of opportunity in which human beings are able to look to the past and the future from the present and affect change.
for a discussion of the novel’s approximation to Agamben’s notion of community. Finally, I argue that the novel is a transformative text that engages the reader to re-examine normative paradigms of belonging to imagine sustainable commonalities that do not evince an essence.

In conclusion, I propose that Díaz’s novel presents an alternative view of community that coincides with Agamben’s vision of collectivity as a process where being is always a becoming that undermines the notion of a static body politic. His characters are engaged in a process of deracinated belonging that opens up the possibility for new concepts of self while they negotiate interactions with similarly engaged singularities.
Chapter 1: Negotiating Borders in Kairological Time

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the characters’ marginal positionings as they move through diasporic communities require a crossing of borders that undermines the official discourses of belonging that hope to maintain them. Protagonists slip in and out of imposed identities from a no-man’s-land of being which paradoxically enables resistance. Thus, their liminality opens a space that Homi Bhabha calls the “beyond,” a space of interruption which makes possible an “encounter with newness” from which “something begins its presencing” (*LC* 7, 5). This ‘beyond’ is the border site of Bhabha’s vernacular cosmopolitanism which envisions cosmopolitan communities in a marginality. Emerging from a border narrower than the human horizon, there exists a process of paradox in which the daily struggle for survival requires both the exposure of difference and its simultaneous erasure. He associates this paradox with Franz Fanon’s insistence that national consciousness, not nationalism, can foster an international recognition of difference in the anti-colonial struggle. Thus, for Bhabha, a national narrative is both pedagogical and performative. It is pedagogical in that citizens are bounded by an imagined community that moves through homogenous time (*LC* 145-148). However, he is more interested in the performative through which the identity of a community is a continual process of becoming in chiasmatic time (“Unsatisfied” 191-193). While Díaz does not share Bhabha’s interest in the nation as a bounded community, he values the liminal spaces of society from which individuals can interrupt and innovate the present. Therefore, in *Oscar Wao* we see on a smaller scale, one of communities and not nation states, instances of Bhabha’s vernacular cosmopolitanism as the characters’ actions and interactions across imposed divisions of race, 

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6 Chiasmatic time refers to the Latin *chiamus*, or ‘cross pollination’ and therefore signifies here the intersection of temporal registers.
ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality become meaningful in the context of the community. The individuals in the novel share a space of shifting borders in an in-between zone on the edge of homogenizing discourses of civil society. For Bhabha, the flux of this interstitial space makes possible a transformative dissonance in which people become unrecognizable strangers to themselves so that solidarity in a secular society is based on both commonality and the recognition of difference (“Unsatisfied” 197).

Like Bhabha, Díaz insists that an acceptance of alterity and discordance is critical for a sustainable community. In Oscar Wao, people are part of a commonality that is heterogeneous as the diaspora is a complex and fluid site of liminality where identities can be forged and space claimed but where there are no guarantees. This uncertainty and the blurring of cultural boundaries undermines the notion of fixed identities and allows for a realignment of memory and the present. That is, the flow of culture destabilizes the teloi of official historical narratives and reveals a non-linear and fragmented past. With this uncovering of a palimpsest of histories, the past is reclaimed for the transformation of the day-to-day lives of individuals. Both Bhabha and Díaz call for the recuperation of histories not to preserve a fixed past but for the reinscription of the present. They resist historicist causality represented as a sequence of events enacted in homogenous empty time. Rather, they draw attention to continuance in the chiasmatic time of the day to day—or the “temporality of continuance”—in which the past is refigured to interrupt the performance of the present. Thus, Diaz’s text appears to agree with Bhabha’s notion that on the “liminal borders of homogenizing discourses of nationality” memory is realigned and the present quotidian experience “articulates a defiant and transformative ‘dissatisfaction’” that unexpectedly fosters a more worldly responsibility (“Unsatisfied” 190, 197).
Agamben also views history as non-progressive and fractured, a space of disjunction and anachronism (CC 41). In rejecting chronological time for kairological time, Agamben reveals a concept of history that allows for its disruption as a means of reworking the present. In his essay, “What is the Contemporary?” (2009), he insists that the individual who claims the present as “my time” breaks the continuity of history and creates gaps in time that become a “meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations” (52). By thus dividing and interpolating time, the contemporary has the ability to transform time and link it with other times; the contemporary adheres to the present while maintaining a distance from it, and therefore can perceive both its limitations and its potentials. In this way, the contemporary finds herself or himself in an in-between time full of possibility and can read histories in innovative ways that bring about an exposure for a process of renewal. The present then is a space of profound dissonance in which potentiality is contingent on processes of temporal connections and a movement of being not from a fixed past toward an inevitable future, but towards its own becoming.

In Díaz’s novel the mobility of the marginalized in kairological time throughout the diaspora is fundamental for the realization of a viable sense of self. The narrative begins with two epigraphs that problematize notions of identity as fixed in bounded communities engaged in linear trajectories. The poem “The Schooner Flight” (1979) by Derek Walcott presents the problematic binary of an imposed identity, i.e. marginalized citizen, in the voice of the narrator, a Caribbean migrant of autochthonous, African and European origin:

    Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!
    From that dog rotting down Wrightson Road
    To when I was a dog on these streets;
If loving these islands must be my load,
Out of corruption my soul takes wings,
But they had started to poison my soul
With their big house, big ca, big-time bohbohl,
Coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,
So I leave it for them and their carnival—
I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road,
I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
A rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
That hey nickname Shabine, the patois for
Any red nigger, and I, Shabine saw
When these slums of empire was paradise.
I’m just a red nigger who love the sea, I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.

Here Díaz obliges the reader to reflect on the movement of oppressed peoples both past and present who lack a rooted identity while officially belonging to nations that only exist in the imaginary of dominant discourse. Both witness and voice of his people’s suffering, the narrator of the poem, living like a “dog” along a wharf in Trinidad, rejects the carnival of capitalism by fleeing to the sea. Thus, the author opens the novel with a focus on the way in which the inheritance of oppression under market forces has denied the oppressed a space of belonging. They have become souls poisoned by the “slums of empire” who imposed on them a physical and psychic displacement. In Poetics of Relation (1997), Édouard Glissant describes this double
displacement as the quintessential condition of the uprooted peoples of the Caribbean: for the abandoned orphans of globalization, “roots make the commonality of errantry and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking” (11). As in Walcott’s poem, the errant suffers “a debasement more eternal than apocalypse” (6); and the image of the ship adrift on the abyss of the unknown “whose chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories” becomes a metaphor for the transience of oppressed peoples who are permanently exiled to anonymity (7).

Díaz draws further attention to the violence of hegemony in another epigraph, a quote from the Marvel comic Fantastic Four (1961), which refers to Galactus, a diabolical superhero that devours entire worlds for survival. He presents the reader with the question, “Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus??” In this discourse of popular culture, the lives of the anonymous inhabitants of diverse worlds are fleeting and individuals are divested of agency before a power whose siblings are eternity and death. That is, with globalization the victims of consumerism are silenced by the hegemonic narratives that perpetuate the brutal marginalization of an errant population. However, Díaz’s use of this quote is also a subversion of the subject/object binary for Galactus cannot survive without the planets he devours: their ‘import’ is fundamental. Moreover, Galactus himself is an inherent part of the cosmos whose existence depends as much on the negative energies of the universe as it does on its positive forces. This interdependence of cosmic beings means that they are constantly negotiating existence so that the universe constitutes a type of ordered chaos.

7 Please see Chapter Four for a discussion of oppression in the Antilles and Antonio Benítez-Rojos’s Pan-Caribbean discourse.

8 First published by Marvel Comics, The Fantastic Four comic was created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby.
Glissant uses the term *chaos-monde* to describe the fluid working of the world which is “neither fusion nor confusion” in which “individuals and communities go beyond vainglory and suffering, power and impatience together—however imperceptibly” (94-95). Thus, for Glissant the mobility of errantry dissolves binaries but is neither chaotic nor aimless. On the contrary, it involves not only a process of deracination but “a dialectics of rerouting” consistent with “a will to identity, which is a search for a freedom within particular surroundings” (16, 20). However, while Glissant and Diaz deconstruct binaries, they agree with Bhabha’s and Agamben’s favouring of the dissonance of difference over the utopia of a harmonious uniformity. Thus, unlike the travelers, discoverers, and conquerors of hegemony whose ties to capitalism Walcott’s narrator, Shabine,\(^9\) rejects, the errant does not seek the affirmation of an essential rootedness. Rather, her or his gaze is always directed towards new horizons: “Errant thought silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant, and at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us” (18). Thus, Shabine defies both empire and nation with his affirmation of a syncretic identity: “I, Shabine . . . have Dutch, nigger, and English in me [and] I taking a sea bath.” Due to his ambivalent relationship with the colonizer as a subject who is both of and removed from the machinations of capitalist commerce, the errant has the desire to cleanse himself of the corrupt history of empire for a possible rebirth. Thus, from the two epigraphs the anguish suffered over past and present violence and the search for potential spaces of agency in a transitory existence emerge as *leitmotifs* from which Diaz’s narrative flows.

\(^9\) In the Caribbean, Shabine is a term for a light-skinned person of African origins.
1.1 Repressed Traumas

The discourses of power in the Dominican Republic have left a legacy of trauma since the Spanish conquest and the history of slavery, to the Trujillo dictatorship, the occupation of the United States, and the present slavery under economic disparity. This fraught history is inscribed on the minds and bodies of an entire population and travels with them as they traverse the diaspora. Thus, in the novel the immigrants to New Jersey suffer a personal and collective trauma that persists not only in their birthplace but also in their adoptive country where they are equally unable to participate in an empowered community. Deprived of voice, the displaced insulate themselves against further oppression by maintaining silence as they long for the right to presence an identity. Paradoxically, however, their mute state denies them agency as it produces a collective blindness that will never allow them to navigate the past for present agency (Miranda 29). As a result, the past festers under a false mask of homogeneous belonging. Concurring with Glissant’s notion of rootlessness, Díaz confirms that this uniform mask of socio-cultural commonality does not exist in reality as the diaspora is constructed of a plurality of peoples with diverse life experiences in function of their cultural reality, race, sex, class, and individual character. Besides being black, Díaz’s protagonist, Oscar, is an obese nerd and effeminate virgin born in the United States; and his lighter-skinned friend Yunior, the principal narrator, is a voracious reader and a male chauvinist intent on living the myth of the virile Dominican male. Also, Yunior’s father, now an American immigrant, supports the invasion of the United States; and Oscar’s mother, Beli, survives torture at the hands of the dictatorship in the Caribbean only

10 Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (1891 – 1961) was president of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1938 and from 1942 to 1952. After being forced by the OAS to cede the presidency to his brother Hector Trujillo (1908 - 2002), who held the post until 1960, he continued to control the country as military leader until his assassination in 1960. As a result of his tyrannical rule of the country, citizens and ex-patriots alike became victims of extreme brutality with deaths numbering over 50,000 people.
to live under another authoritarian government in the U.S. where menial labour destroys her body. As Katherine Miranda insists, the socio-cultural divides between the characters reflect the fractures of the multiple worlds of the diaspora that frustrate the recognition of a shared history of violent oppression (24).

Despite the attempts of this mute and fragmented community to repress the knowledge of a shared past that is nevertheless heterogeneous in character, the spectre of untold histories persists in the collective memory in the form of a curse: *el fukú americanus*. According to Díaz, the past is a weight that “works its way into things [because] the shadow of history doesn’t go away . . . it’s a shadow from a past that’s very old and very long” (“In Darkness” 16). Thus, in the Antilles the *fukú americanus* represents the recrudescent curse of the ‘New World’ that arrived with Christopher Columbus, the moment from which “we’ve all been in the shit” (1). However, the *fukú* is not only a recurring nightmare for generations of Dominicans, but also for all those who carry the curse with them since Columbus himself became a victim of the curse dying “miserable and syphilitic” (1). In addition, although it was clear Trujillo and the *fukú* curse “had an understanding, that them two was *tight,*” this relationship was ambiguous as “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal” (2-3). Similarly, after the CIA assassinated the dictator in 1961, John F. Kennedy’s family inherited the curse. In other words, for Díaz the perpetrators of tyranny become victims of their own violence, and in this way the author once again complicates the distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed. Nevertheless, the destabilizing of this binary does not trivialize the suffering of the marginalized. Without a doubt, Díaz does not compare the atrocities endured under authoritarian
rule with the misfortunes of hegemony. On the contrary, the fukú that plagues the colonizer, the dictator, and the proponents of U.S. expansionism is a reference to the degradation the entire human race suffers under hegemonic rule: “Santo Domingo might be fukú’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (2). Therefore, from the first chapter of the novel Díaz establishes that the horrific violence of past regimes of power affects all of humanity and haunts the memory of the marginalized in their present subjugation. In this way, there is a doubling of the fukú, whose form as the ghost of past trauma becomes the reality of present violence, as much for the forces of oppression as for its traumatized victims.

As a phantom of the past that resides in the individual and collective subconscious, the fukú curse is incarnated in the form of a man without a face who appears before moments of terror for each generation of the León family. However, Díaz only introduces this non-character in the novel when Oscar’s grandmother, La Inca, is ready to break her silence regarding the tragic tale of her daughter’s youth: the past that her daughter lost when an “entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, unchartered trenches of her soul” (258). The words of La Inca open space for a return of the repressed past, and as her name indicates, she becomes a voice beside those of the unheard victims of oppression since the Spanish conquest. She speaks of an unutterable trauma, of that which has neither name nor face but the memory of which appears unbidden to interrupt the present.

According to Homi Bhabha, when a traumatic past comes to the individual as a sudden return of the repressed or a haunting, one mode of history interferes with another and alters

11 Here I use the term hegemony to refer to both the traditional 19th century concept of geopolitical hegemony and Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony in the 20th century.
reality. Bhabha cites Sigmund Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* or unhomely/uncanny, “the name for everything that ought to have been hidden but has come to light,” to explain the disorientation that occurs when a traumatic past that has been repressed or forgotten is recalled in the time of *ho nyn kairos* or “the time of the now” (*LC* 10). In “The Uncanny” (1919), Freud claims the word *unheimlich* can signify both the familiar and the unfamiliar in a way that is neither ambiguous nor contradictory. Similarly, *heimlich*, or that which is familiar, is a word “the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite *unheimlich*” (226). Therefore, for individuals who experience trauma, the experienced past becomes alienated from the mind through a process of repression. However, when the memories of traumatic events return unexpectedly, bubbling to the surface of consciousness, the forgotten past reappears and the anxiety produced by this recurrence transforms the familiar into something frightening. Thus, when La Inca describes the savage beating of Belicia,12 she transforms the figure of her tyrannical daughter into a victim of shocking violence, and Díaz introduces the man without the face as a metaphor for the unspeakable suffering which continues to haunt the family.

1.2 The Face and the Faceless One

In *Means without End* (2000), Agamben describes the human face as the only location of community in which human beings disclose their singularity free of essence (50). He argues that the face does not reveal the truth about a state of being in the world but allows for an opening that is language, for what human beings have to communicate to each other is above all “a pure

12 Beli’s full name is Hypatia Belicia Cabral. Hypatia was a Greek philosopher in late 4th century Roman Egypt, the first notable woman in the history of mathematics. Much like the interruption of Beli’s life by various discourses of power, Hypatia’s life ended tragically when she was assassinated by a Christian mob.
communicability.” However, only where human beings encounter a face that reveals properties that do not essentially identify or belong to them can they enjoy the passion of revelation, which is the revelation of language itself:

The face is not something that transcends the visage: it is the exposition of the visage in all its nudity, it is victory over character – it is word . . . In the face I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional . . . ) but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me. The face is the threshold of depropriation and of de-identification of all manners and of all qualities—a threshold in which only the latter become purely communicable. And only where I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an outside happen to me. (53)

Thus, for both Agamben and Díaz, an absence of face signifies a lack of language and communicability, a ghostly silence that stifles the voices of past trauma and suppresses the painful narratives of the present.

The history of subjugation that Caribbean communities have endured since the colonization of the region continues well into the twentieth century as the León family’s fukú. Although Beli never speaks of her childhood and surrenders to “the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination . . . the power of the Untilles” (258-259), the repressed past always returns to haunt the persecuted. As the Dominican Republic is also the epicenter of the fukú curse, the family experiences the full force of hegemonic violence and its silencing effect. As Beli is a child of the Trujillo era, the dictator or “Fuckface” (2), who is killed with a shot in the face, frequents the dreams of Beli’s mother in the form of a man without a face just before her husband’s imprisonment. After this tragic event and
the subsequent disappearance of Beli’s family, the phantom is present at every horrific encounter the following generations have with the strong-arm tactics of the authoritarian regime and the violence it engenders in Dominican society.

Left an orphan, Beli experiences the ways in which a bellicose patriarchy permeates daily life on the island. She suffers terrible abuse at the hands of her adoptive father who empties a skillet of burning oil on her as his “face turned blank” (261). Later, having escaped from her foster family but physically and mentally scarred for life after repeated abuse, she passes through a remote community and sees a skinned goat. Beli, whose surname is Cabral,\textsuperscript{13} notices that the skin of its face is like a “funeral mask” that triggers “dim memories of her Lost Years” that is, of her tormented childhood (135). In a scene that reminds the reader of the widespread disintegration of communities under the Trujillo regime, she also thinks she glimpses a faceless man as he waves to her from a rocking chair; however, before she can confirm this “the pueblito vanishe[s] in the dust” (135). Shortly after this premonition, Beli catches sight of the faceless man again on one of the dictator’s henchmen who attempts to capture her. Finally, the spectre of Trujillo as a faceless police officer greets her just before she becomes the victim of a savage assault at the hands of his thugs. History is repeated when they beat her “like she was a slave. Like she was a dog,” and it is “the end of language, the end of hope.” As her boyfriend The Gangster earlier jokes when he ejaculates on her scarred back, her mute body is “like a chalkboard” on which the law inscribes her subjugation (163). In this moment in which she loses language and is left mute to “dwell forever, alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick,

\textsuperscript{13} The name ‘Cabral’ is derived from the Latin word ‘capra’, meaning ‘goat’.

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pretending that the scribble was letters, words, names,” she is in a cane field, a site that alludes to generations of slavery and brutality (147-148).

1.3 The Plantation Full Circle

The abuse that took place in the Caribbean under colonial rule continues for individuals on the margins of the global market economy; however, the plantation is not only a site where language fails, but also one which offers the potential for a new communicability. In Poetics of Relation (1997), Édouard Glissant insists that the plantation is a focal point for the development of multiple relationships that can foster agented communities: “Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable” (65). While plantations in the Caribbean were enclosed by boundaries that people crossed on pain of severe punishment or death, the workers’ destitution obliged them to risk the repercussions of breaking rules to engage in various odd jobs to supplement their income. Therefore, both the rigid structure of their lives and their consequent subverting of the rules resulted in the fragmentation of the capitalist system. In addition, the plantation’s dependence on international commerce meant that the planters neither had control over the market nor the ability to develop an independent monetary system. These factors combined with the inter-contaminations within the social hierarchy complicated relationships on the plantation and undermined the notion of the plantation as an invulnerable bastion of progress. Thus, according to Glissant, socially “the Plantation is not the product of a politics but the emanation of a fantasy . . . where the contradictions become madness” (67) resulting in a new communicability.
The new voices that emerged from the fissures created by the contradictory forces of the tobacco, cotton and sugar trade took various forms allowing for a disruption of the linear narrative of history: tales, proverbs, and songs spoke of past and present struggle; creole combined basic functional language with unspoken desires for a new subversive speech; and the dissonance of jazz became the non-verbal expression of plantation life. These new discourses opened the closed space of the plantation and informed the lived experience of the Caribbean where “memory . . . is not a calendar memory . . . [and] time does not keep company with the rhythms of months and year alone; it is aggravated by the void, the final sentence of the Plantation” (72). Similarly, the cane field in which Beli almost meets her end is an interstitial site where chronological time gives way to kairological time in a confluence of contingent histories. This temporal palimpsest reveals an ambivalence that opens space for Agamben’s contemporary who is given the opportunity to access his or her potentiality to transform reality. However, while the liminal space of the plantation can reveal multiple narratives for the renewal of ‘the time of the now’, there is no guarantee of success. Beli, for example, is unable to escape the continued assault on her body and psyche.

Even before Beli is left mute after her encounter with the faceless man in the cane field, her resistance to oppression is futile. First as a victim of racial, social, and sexual discrimination she tries to escape persecution by leaving school and renouncing an education that will guarantee her marginalization. Shaking her head 66 times in refusal, crying “NO,”14 she decides to assume control of her life: “Never again would she follow any lead other than her own . . . Only me, she whispered. Me.” Thus, her first adult oath “I will not serve” becomes a life-long mantra that

14 This is an allusion to Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in which the use of the feminine word ‘Yes’ signifies the end of resistance. Bloom affirms her own needs and rejects being the object of men’s desire.
isolates her from others and sabotages her attempt to secure agency (103). Ironically, she finds a job as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant frequented mostly by men and where she learns the various skills that will guarantee her failure to go beyond a life of subsistence. Moreover, while she rejects patriarchy, she cannot avoid becoming an object of desire for a state police officer and must suffer the consequences alone. After her romance with The Gangster and her subsequent torture in the cane field, her only recourse is to flee to the United States to become the “Empress of Diaspora” (106).

Once in New Jersey, however, life in the North American consumer society only exacerbates her subjugation. She takes on multiple jobs dealing with the waste of industrial capitalism so that her family can survive. As a black woman from the ghetto, her doubly oppressed body becomes an object on which the laws of a neoliberal market are inscribed over the scars of the dictatorship forming strata of subjugation. The image of her watching a soap opera as she waits for the results of a medical exam to determine whether she has cancer underscores the illusory nature of her life-long attempt to escape subjection. As her daughter remarks, “You never would have known her life was in the balance. She watched the TV like it was the only thing that mattered” (63). Finally, after years of toil as a slave of capitalism, Beli succumbs to the violence of disease, the physical manifestation of her Othering. Her inability to acknowledge the past, even as it materializes as a breast tumour like a “knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot” (53), guarantees the perpetuation of the fuku curse. Haunted by an unspeakable past and marginalized by the absolutism of the sovereign state, the younger generation struggle to construct a viable sense of self and community.
Chapter 2: Alterity and Ambivalence in the Dominican Diaspora

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben insists that the disjuncture between the sovereign state and ‘whatever singularity’ will be the focus of coming politics. This is not the simple affirmation of the social through protests in opposition to national government, for ‘whatever singularities’ cannot form an identifiable *societas*. Rather, as the state cannot tolerate the forming of an unrepresentable co-belonging because sovereignty is not founded on a social bond but on the dissolution it prohibits, the coming community will become an intolerable threat (85). For Agamben, the sovereign reserves a right to declare that nothing is outside the law, except the sovereign, creating a state of exception that characterizes democratic nations today. Through this state of exception, the state exercises a logic of abandonment so that the democratic nation cannot fulfill its mandate to protect life. By separating *zoe*—natural life from *bios*—political life, the state reduces the individual’s life to ‘bare life’: politicized life without political agency. In this condition of *homo sacer*, individuals can be killed but not sacrificed; that is, the state cannot safeguard the lives of citizens who it deems unworthy of political agency (*Homo Sacer* 12). Today, individuals such as Beli and her son Oscar who are silenced on the margins of society are irrelevant to the state, which is what the rhetoric of human rights declarations (always subject to the law) attempts to hide. Therefore, they, and any individual for that matter, can be denied their basic human rights as only the state has the power to determine who is legally entitled to them. Like Agamben, Díaz calls for a community which can free individuals from this *aporia* lying at the foundation of Western politics, for human rights can only be guaranteed if the individual’s life, *zoe* and *bios*, is removed from state control (*HS* 13). This chapter examines the mechanisms of hegemonic discourse that divest the characters in *Oscar Wao* of political agency so that they exemplify Agamben’s *homo sacer* yet maintain the potential for realizing a viable sense of self.
In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz depicts the ‘bare life’ of the individuals of diasporic communities whose minority status over several generations persists as they traverse the Caribbean Sea. The non-linear text develops from their movement between the interrupted cultural narratives of the Dominican Republic and the United States where silenced pasts haunt individuals and communities, thwarting their struggle for agency. Having fled oppression in one patriarchal state, the immigrants face further oppression under the hegemonic discourse of a ‘developed’ nation. However, while past trauma is inextricably linked with the displacement imposed on the Dominican diaspora, the circuitous migrations of peoples since the arrival of Columbus has produced a cultural kaleidoscope offering individuals and communities new spaces for the negotiation of identity. The cultural hybridity of immigrants in New Jersey exacerbates their marginalization but also forces them to inhabit liminal spaces where identifications of race, gender, and class are always mutable. That is, as *hominis sacri*, the protagonists experience a permeable subjectivity that undermines static concepts of the self and offers them the potential for participating in communities with a united *bios* and *zoe*. Thus, in contrast to the traditional coming-of-age novel, Yunior’s tragicomic account of his friend Oscar’s psycho-social development across cultures impugns societal norms rather than reinforces them.

### 2.1 The Knowable Other

In *Oscar Wao*, the authority of the state is inscribed on the bodies and minds of the victims of oppression in both the Dominican Republic and the United States where dominant discourse essentializes the identity of those reduced to ‘bare life’. Like the first-generation Dominican-Americans, Yunior’s and Oscar’s day-to-day existence involves the constant navigation of the ideological constructs of their alterity. Hegemonic discourse attempts to fix the
Other as a knowable and therefore controllable difference, and a useful tool for homogenizing the Other is the stereotype as it normalizes differences between the privileged and the marginalized and serves as means of control. Thus, in the Antilles of Diaz’s novel, the stereotype of the Dominican male is more a reflection of the execution of masculinity according to the dictates of the Trujillo regime than a cultural phenomenon. Yunior describes Trujillo as a tyrant whose psychological hold on the nation is maintained through physical coercion:

[He was] a portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin [and] came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. (2)

The dictator’s domination over his masculine subjects and his reputation as a sexual predator, whose victims included “thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women” characterize the physical aggression of the state over the disenfranchised (2). Therefore, Trujillo embodies the long arm of sovereignty which must establish arbitrary limits to its citizen’s liberty in order to justify its existence.

In the United States, the characters also become victims of the state’s attempt to control the voices of those deemed unworthy of political agency. Yunior, Oscar’s family, and their diasporic community are divested of any political agency that threatens the dominance of mainstream society, which means their citizenship is more nominal than real. That is, the exclusion of non-hegemonic narratives in dominant discourse in the U.S. prevents them from having a voice in the imagined community of the nation state. As a result, they are segregated
from the more privileged citizens of the state and relegated to a life of impoverishment. Thus, a wiser Yunior warns Beli not to laugh when La Inca tells her she has to emigrate:

Oh, Beli; not so rashly, not so rashly: What did you know about states or diasporas? What did you know about Nueba Yol or unheated ‘old law’ tenements or children whose self-hate short-circuited their minds? What did you know, madame, about immigration? Don’t laugh, mi negrita, for your world is about to be changed. Utterly. Yes: a terrible beauty is etc., etc. Take it from me. (160)

The reference to William Butler Yeats’s poem “Easter, 1916,” underscores the suffering that Beli must experience in the States. The poet’s ambivalence regarding the Easter Rising after the violent suppression of Irish revolutionaries by the British is a reminder of the consequences of opposing the sovereign state. In this way, Díaz portrays the othering of the disenfranchised in Dominican and American society as a means for reinforcing borders both within and between nations.

Having crossed one national border only to find themselves negotiating new socio-political and cultural boundaries in North America, the immigrants develop “a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewheres” (77), which their children inherit. This melancholy grows out of a desire for belonging in a society that excludes them by fixing them as Other. Like their parents, Oscar and Yunior lack **bios** and yearn for a community in which they can realize a viable sense of self. In Yunior’s case, this becomes evident in his frustrated search for love despite his efforts to embody the quintessential Latino: the ‘macho’ man with an insatiable sexual appetite and a great capacity for violence. An insidious cultural mechanism of oppression, this stereotype remains so ingrained in society that it penetrates the psyche of individuals who subconsciously reinforce their own victimization. Therefore, confirming
Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in which a dominant cultural group rules by both force and the consent of its subjects, Yunior internalizes the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized man of colour; surprised at his begrudging Oscar a flirtation he wonders, “Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time, and that wasn’t even counting the side-sluts I scooped up at the parties and the clubs” (185). For Yunior and Oscar, this aggressive machismo is part of the Dominican cultural paradigm into which they were indoctrinated at birth. When as a child Oscar returns home complaining of his problems with one of his girlfriends, his mother throws him to the floor insisting, “Dale un galletazo, . . . then see if the little puta respects you” (14). Here, sexuality and violence are two sides of the same coin stamped with the face of male authority.

While Yunior may be living up to a popularized Dominican ideal, his overt virility only confirms his inferior difference in the U.S. Although he criticizes Oscar’s lack of machismo, he is equally rejected by North American society which associates the perceived promiscuity of minority groups with primitivism. Moreover, the notion that the primal instincts of the hyper-sexualized Other reveal an implicit aggressivity in men is deeply rooted in the collective subconscious. As a result, Yunior becomes a target for street beatings at the hands of youths who have assimilated the stereotype; however, he does not go to a hospital because he cannot afford medical insurance. Here Yunior’s status as homo sacer is experienced on various levels: intra-state policing fails to protect him from the violence of fellow marginalized youths who are in turn victims of the “NJ State Police patented nigger-killer lock” (287); and the national medical

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-Raymond Williams explains Gramsci’s idea of the internalization of hegemonic discourse in this way: “Hegemony is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people . . . beyond which it is very difficult . . . to move, a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (110).
system cannot guarantee his physical health for he does not conform to state law. Therefore, despite his numerous conquests, Yunior remains alienated from the mainstream community while remaining exposed to its inherent brutality, and his macho persona frustrates his ability to maintain healthy relationships with women. In this way, the stereotype of the libidinous Latino both in the Dominican Republic and the United States underscores the subjectification of the male characters under national discourses of power that depend on physical and psychic violence for the control of its citizens.

Born in New Jersey outside the concept of masculinity imposed by the Trujillo regime, Oscar is equally lacking in bios. Unlike Yunior, however, he is an object of ridicule even among the marginalized as he fails to fit the mold of the Dominican Lothario. The antithesis of the stereotypical Latin male, Oscar is an obese bibliophile who is looking for love and the loss of his virginity. However, his search is frustrated by his incapacity to navigate either the cultural norms of his family’s adopted home or the expectations of a community that refuses to speak of the past. As a youth trapped between cultures, Oscar experiences a double oppression further compounded by his singularity. He is an effeminate black youth in an ostensibly machista immigrant culture, and he has an obsessive interest in science fiction, both of which condemn him to social ostracism. The verbal abuse he suffers in school as a child accumulates in kilos of fat, like layers of defective Kevlar, which cannot protect him from the relentless persecution of a society that wants nothing of him save his silence. Unlike Yunior who can conceal his “otakunidad” (a derogatory term derived from the Japanese word otaku meaning loser or nerd) with his patent machismo, Oscar “couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to” (21). Thus, at the university he is shunned by his peers: “The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and
seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican” (49). A black youth lacking the requisite ultra-masculine qualities of the Latin male, Oscar is fixed by yet another cliché, that of the nerd. Therefore, rendered multiply Other he is alienated from both his own community and that of the dominant culture. His over-extended body becomes the physical manifestation of a desire to camouflage his alterity, and his search for love is, in effect, the longing for an absent community. The official discourse of the imagined nation state fails his family in the Dominican Republic and in the U.S. where, forced to work three jobs to survive, his mother leaves him emotionally abandoned. In spite of his calorie-laden armour, Oscar is the tormented antihero of not one but two discourses of power that reduce him to homo sacer: the citizen lacking agency in the hegemonic imaginary. Thus, rendered invisible by hegemonic power regimes, he becomes another victim of patriarchal authority in a Dominican plantation.

Díaz’s use of invisibility as a trope denoting the socio-cultural and political absence of the displaced in dominant discourse confirms the immigrant’s status as homo sacer, or a human being who deprived of voice is no longer human. That is, she or he is a life without the right to participate as an equal in political life. As Hannah Arendt confirms in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), “a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a man” (300). Thus, we learn that lacking political voice in the Dominican Republic and the U.S., generations of the León family pass through life as spectres of the state rather than agented presences. As the fukú curse haunts the present reality of the marginalized, invisibility and disappearances characterize daily life in the patriarchal state. For instance, acting outside the law by refusing to introduce his daughter to Trujillo, Oscar’s grandfather is detained and becomes a non-person in the eyes of state law, for “no disappearance was more total, more ultimate, than Abelard’s” (247). Similarly, inheriting her father’s lack of
zoe, Beli is ostracized at school and banished to “Sycorax territory” with other “ultra-dalits,” or untouchables, that include the Boy in the Iron Lung, the idiot, and the Chinese girl. These nameless fellow outcasts find themselves exiled to the “Phantom Zone” where they cannot participate in the ‘regular’ life of the school. Therefore, when Beli purposely bumps into her crush, Jack Pujols, the wealthy, blue-eyed son of a Trujillista, she remains a sight unseen for him and his friends who perceive only her skin colour: “Maybe she’d see better, one of his lieutenants cracked, if it was dark out. It might as well have been dark out. For all intents and purposes she was invisible to him” (91). On the other hand, Pujols is already being groomed as a future minion of the state and his visibility is assured: “The teachers, the staff: the girls, the boys, all threw petals of adoration beneath his finely arched feet: he was proof positive that God— the Great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! — does not love his children equally” (90). In this way marginality is reinforced at an early age in educational institutions which will not tolerate any deviation from the party line. When a teacher asks the students to contemplate the future of the country and its president, a boy writes in favour of democracy and the end of dictators. In addition, he insists Trujillo killed Jesús de Galíndez. A Basque student who wrote a thesis condemning the despot’s regime, Galíndez disappeared in New York after fleeing the Dominican Republic. Both the boy and his teacher soon vanish. Thus, the children learn that without political agency they are included in society solely through exclusion: they are the nation’s Other.

Deeply ingrained in the psyches of Dominican children, this obscurity continues into adulthood and from one generation to the next so that even the unborn of *hominis sacri* inherit

16 Sycorax territory is a site of banishment for Caliban’s mother, Sycorax, in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and the terrain of an alien slave owning species in the television series *Dr. Who*.
their families’ oppression. Having miscarried after a beating by Trujillo’s men, Beli tries to talk about her dead baby; however, her gangster boyfriend “wave[s] the diminutive ghost away with a flick of his wrist and proceed[s] to remove her enormous breasts from the vast armature of her bra” thereby dismissing them both (162). Here, merely an object of physical pleasure, Beli’s life has no more value than that of the lost child, neither of whom are truly present for the Trujillato. In this way, Díaz draws attention to the absence of marginalized voices in the discursive space of the nation state, which leaves individuals in a political no-man’s land where being does not signify living.

According to Agamben there is little difference between the dead and the living for those whose human rights are not protected by the juridical structures of public life. Positioned on the threshold between inside and outside state politics, modern biopolitics confounds the difference between life and death: “[W]hen natural life is wholly included in the polis—and this much has already happened—these thresholds pass, as we shall see, beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man” (HS 77). Thus, this living death continues for Beli’s other children, Oscar and Lola, who survive birth to become adults in a society that disavows their presence. Oscar’s affection for a girl is a “huge sputtering force” that is “most like a ghost” because it goes unnoticed, so he cries where nobody can hear him. Here Oscar’s ‘ghostliness’ is both imposed on him and reinforced by his own withdrawal from the pain of his experience as a social outcast. When his sister tells him he has to be less extreme in his pursuit of love after a near fatal encounter with a girl’s abusive boyfriend, he replies, “I know I do . . . But I don’t know if I’m even here, you know?” (48). An outsider in a culture that denies him agency, Oscar cannot locate a viable self and remains a phantom of New Jersey society. Similarly, although Lola appears to have more visibility in North American
culture, she is equally marginalized and repeatedly expresses her desire to disappear “like my father disappeared on my mother and was never seen again. Disappeared like everything disappears” (209). Like her mother who becomes visible only after she develops physically in the “Summer of Her Secondary Sex Characteristics . . . [and] a terrible beauty has been born” (91), she exemplifies Agamben’s living dead for she remains a body ripe for patriarchal consumption. At the age of eight she is sexually abused and forced to keep silent for her body is not protected from a social order in which domestic violence and rape continue unchecked and women have no legal right to control their own fertility.17

2.2 Femina Sacra: Masks of Femininity

While Oscar and Yunior are doubly oppressed as hybrid identities and Oscar’s effeminate nature compounds his marginality, the female characters endure the violence of multiple discourses that reduce them to sexual/reproductive beings. Indeed, the language that Yunior uses to describe women and their relationships with men underscores the extent to which the characters have absorbed traditional paradigms of heteronormativity. Mimicking stereotypical machista discourse which constructs women as objects of desire, Yunior begins his narrative with a description of Oscar as anything but the ideal Dominican male, i.e. “a playboy with a million hots on his jocks” (11). Nevertheless, as a boy with a “nascent pimp-lieness,” he is more like Porfirio Rubirosa, one of Trujillo’s underlings and a notorious playboy, “the original Dominican Player, [who] fucked all sorts of women” (12). Here the violence of the language sets the parodic tone for the portrayal of women in much of the novel. The use of derogatory

17 According to “US Legal,” although abortion has been legal in the U.S. since 1973, “in no state is unrestricted abortion legal; indeed, virtually all states begin with the presumption that abortion is a crime.” Abortion is illegal in the Dominican Republic.
feminine terms such as puta, toto, ‘bitch’, ‘pussy’, ‘fat twat’, ‘ass’, and ‘skank’ throughout the text confirms a familiar sexist discourse in which women become objectified. Thus, a neighbour walks “like she ha[s] a bell for an ass” (13); one of Oscar’s childhood crushes, Olga, “smelled on some days of ass (13); and another, Maritza, has a “body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities” and “is good at men” (18). Moreover, fragmented into desirable/undesirable parts, the female body determines female subjectivity. As “la tetua suprema” with a “serious case of hips-ass-chest,” Beli is endowed with a physical beauty that makes her truly feminine or in Yunior’s words “a mujerón total” (92, 216, 91). Similarly, the other female characters are either guapas and “hot-as-balls Latinas,” (26) or feas whose substandard status only allows them a minor role in the sexual education of young men. For instance, when Oscar proves inept at seducing girls, his uncle suggests he begin his instruction with ‘lesser’ women: “Listen, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y metéselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y metéselo!” (24). The despective tone expressed in Spanglish parodies the familiar masculinist discourse of two cultures that imagines women as objects and only desirable when their outward appearance conforms to an imposed feminine ideal. As Díaz insists, “We live in a patriarchal imaginary where men cannot conceptualise women as fully human” (“Junot Díaz”). In this way, Díaz brings attention to hegemonic concepts of identity in which women’s bodies are inscribed with a discourse that determines female non-subjectivity.

As the nexus of violence and eroticism in the social construction of subjectivity, the female body in Oscar Wao becomes a fixed object of abjection for the male gaze. Therefore, as perpetrator of this sexist language Yunior can claim, “The only things that changed that year were the models of the cars and the size of Maritza’s ass” (18). The discourse linking women and disposable products confirms women’s status as objects for patriarchal consumption and
becomes the means by which women and their realities are conceptualised. Here Díaz’s ludic
tone subverts the notion of static sexual identities by demonstrating the ways in which language
constitutes gender and produces sexism as a social reality. Indeed, his parodic use of sexist
language supports Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler insists femininity is a mask, a performative act
that allows the individual to participate in a world that essentializes identity: “I think for a
woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect. I don’t think that it’s a given that
on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that ‘coherent
identification’ has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced” (“The Body You Want” 9). For
Butler, then, the female subject is discursively constituted and hegemonic language constructs
sex as a being in itself in a performative act that “conceals the fact that “being” a sex or gender is
fundamentally impossible” (*Gender Trouble* 4, 25). Thus, in *Oscar Wao* there are repeated
allusions to the performativity of ‘woman’. For example, when Oscar falls in love with Anna
Obregón, he is unable to identify her ‘true’ self:

> She was this peculiar combination of badmash and little girl . . . and there was
> something about the seamlessness with which she switched between these aspects
> that convinced him that both were masks, that there existed a third Anna, a hidden
> Anna who determined what mask to throw up for what occasion but who would
> be otherwise obscure and impossible to know. (34-35)

Similarly, when Lola’s friends do her hair and makeup so that she becomes “a real Dominican
girl,” she insists, “I don’t even know who I am anymore” (71). Here Díaz lifts the gendered mask
to reveal the possibility of other ambivalent and mutable selves.
Although Díaz removes the female characters’ masks of femininity to reveal the irreducible nature of being, he is careful to show that like their male counterparts the women have internalized the means of their oppression. Representatives of three generations of women, La Inca, Beli, and Lola, use the words *puta, hijo de puta*, ‘chickie’, or ‘bitch’ to describe others. Moreover, this language reinforces their actions in a performative conflation that perpetuates traditional gender roles. Thus, observing that “No one, alas, [is] more oppressive than the oppressed,” Yunior draws attention to Beli’s internalization of patriarchal discourse early in the novel when she criticizes Oscar’s reluctance to face his bullies and begs him to “Pórtate como un muchacho normal” declaring, “You ain’t a woman to be staying in the house” (22). Even when Oscar’s sister becomes the narrator, she complains of the insidious nature of a discourse that has infiltrated the psyches of generations of women: “You don’t know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around . . . What it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave” (55-56). Having internalized society’s conception of women, Beli becomes a mother “who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her” so that Lola in turn believes that she is “a fea . . . worthless . . . an idiota” (56). And although Lola complains of women’s complicity in masculinist discourse claiming, “[W]e Dominicans, we lose a daughter and we might not even cancel our appointment at the salon,” she is nevertheless subscribing to a stereotype of minority women (66). The same is true of Beli and La Inca who deride Oscar on learning that he is seeing the prostitute, Ybón: “His [Oscar’s] mother and his abuela met him at the door; excuse the stereotype, but both had their hair in rolos and couldn’t believe his sinvergüencería. Do you know that woman’s a PUTA? Do you know she bought that house CULEANDO?” (282). The women see Ybón as a threat to social order; however, she is a threat because she both legitimizes the position ‘good’ women
occupy in society and exposes it for what it is. That is, her role as prostitute repeats the objectification of woman, producing both the recognition and rejection of the familiar degradation of women in society. This tension between the knowledge of shared experience and its disavowal destabilizes gender norms to reveal a commonality. Therefore, as sex object Ybón represents the abjection experienced by woman in general, for, as Julia Kristeva insists, the female body causes abjection or that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Powers 4).

For Julia Kristeva femininity is an abject condition as the feminine is “an ‘other’ without a name” that is abjected from the phallic order because it exposes the ambivalence of patriarchy (Powers 58). As an ‘other’ lacking the phallus and thus confirming an unsignifiable eroticism, the female body problematizes fixed, rational notions of identity. This occurs because it is a reminder of the human connection to the irrational animal world. The female body is “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject” for it evokes the violence of birth and the separation from the mother when the self is divided and therefore mutable (Powers 54). This regression from the symbolic to the semiotic and the carnal/erotic moment of birth represents a liminal space between identity and non-identity, and this potential loss of identity undermines essentialist discourse (Powers 54). In this way, women actualize the transcendence of borders just as the abject flow of menstrual fluid, breast milk or human flesh subverts the notion of a stable self and confirms the permeability of an ambivalent subjectivity. In Oscar Wao, Díaz recuperates the feminine in creating characters whose abjection as hominis sacri reveals a mutable subjectivity that undermines masculinist discourse. Thus, in the novel being emerges as a potentiality located on both the inside and outside of intra and international borders
rather than rooted in the essence of citizenship and a predetermined destiny controlled by the state.

2.3 Observing the Observer: Ambivalence and the Mutability of the Sign

The flux of permeable subjectivities in *Oscar Wao* despite the imposition of stereotypes subverts the complex power dynamics of patriarchy and monolithic configurations of state, communities, and individuals. According to Homi Bhabha, notwithstanding the apparent rigidity of sociocultural labeling for the control of the Other, the object of hegemonic discourse is marked by an ambivalence that involves disorder, degeneration, and repetition (*LC* 66). In the colony, for example, the tension between order and disorder reflects the Other as both feared and desired in a process of identification and denial. Therefore, the colonizer and the colonized negotiate identity in an ambivalent space of attraction and rejection. That is, identity is not situated in isolation but in relation with the Other, which satisfies the desire for difference (*LC* 61). Bhabha compares the stereotype of the colonial Other to fetishism, which is the substitution of the sexual object with another object that functions as a means of reactivating the erotic fantasy created by the original source (*LC* 74). He refers to Freud’s theory of fetishism in which a child, discovering his sexual difference from his mother, fears castration and acquires a fetish to alleviate his fear of difference. The fetish serves to mask the absence of the penis and therefore prevent his possible emasculation. In this way, the fetish is a controllable object of desire that both confirms and compensates for the mother’s lack (“Fetishism” 199).

Extending his argument, Bhabha explains that the fetish and the stereotype are related in their *structural* and *functional* form. Their *structural* form links the unknown—the different race and sex—with the familiar—the fetish or the stereotype. On the other hand, the *functional* form
tying the stereotype and fetish vacillates between the affirmation of racial and sexual difference, and the anxiety regarding a lack of difference (LC 75). In addition, the structural and functional character of the stereotype is a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism: metaphor and metonymy. As a metaphor, the stereotype is a mask for difference and lack in the form of a substitution. On the other hand, the stereotype functions through metonymy as it is the contiguous repetition of a perceived lack. In this way, the stereotype as fetish normalizes racial and sexual difference in order to control the Other, which is both feared and desired. Therefore, at once the recognition and disavowal of the Other’s difference, the stereotype is “a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive” (LC 70).

This ambivalence at the core of stereotypical configurations of the Other is related to the vigilance of the state over the victims of its policing both within and on the margins of socio-political borders and the reduction of life to ‘bare life’. In Oscar Wao, Oscar, Yunior, Beli, and Ybón are distinguished by their physical appearance and public comportment, for the power of the stereotype is dependent on an Other who is constructed visually. According to Bhabha, the dependence of the stereotype on the fixed image of the marginalized is linked to the surveillance of the state which is constantly both seeing and being seen. Bhabha uses Lacan’s term, the Imaginary, to explain the connection between pleasure and power that is produced in the act of observing the other. The phase in which a child develops the psyche begins with the mirror stage in which she or he identifies the self through seeing and being seen. Before this stage, the child does not recognize the self as separated from the mother. Therefore, in this mirror stage he pleases himself with familiar images and the recognition of his own image. However, at the same time he finds himself alienated from the image that appears different from her or him, confirming the problematic condition of being distinct from the mother (Lacan 442).
stereotype, narcissism and aggressivity effectuate a complex identification with the Other, for the Imaginary arises from an understanding of difference and the desire to conceal or negate it in order to avoid a perceived lack (Bhabha, LC 77). Thus, the tropes of the Imaginary, narcissism and agressivity create an ambivalence in which the narcissistic image is juxtaposed with alienation and the possibility of confrontation.

In Díaz’s novel, the vigilance of the Trujillo regime depends on the two identifications of narcissism and aggressivity of the stereotype as Imaginary. Famous for his thousand designer suits and for “changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself” (2), Trujillo is compared to Sauron in Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954) and the Marvel comic character Darkseid. Like these fictional characters, the dictator maintains total tyranny over his victims’ past and present with an omniscient, ubiquitous presence. His lidless Eye surveils the genocide of the Haitians in the Parsley Massacre of 1937, the lucrative trafficking of girls, and the brutal violence against the defenceless hominis sacri of the country: “His Eye was everywhere; he had a Secret Police that out-Stasi’d the Stasi, that kept watch on everyone, even those everyones who lived in the States” (225). The watchful dictator is responsible for the creation of the modern Dominican state and maintains influence throughout the diaspora. Even after his death, his Eye follows generations of the León family as his ghost continues his aspiration “to be an architect of history . . . through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood . . . [that] inflicted a true border . . . that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of the people” (225). In this way, whether in the Antilles or in North America, Trujillo’s ghost in the form of a man without a face represents the erased history

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18 In 1937, Trujillo ordered his troops to eradicate the Haitian population that resided in the Dominican Republic. As a result, between 20,000 and 30,000 Haitians were killed in The Parsley Massacre.
of the *fukú americanus* that “came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved . . . the ground Zero of the New World” (1). Thus the confluence of brutality and narcissism forges the Imaginary of a society in which the past and the present discourse of authority is inscribed in the collective subconscious of the oppressed. Nevertheless, the complex character of vigilance not only involves the gaze of the oppressor on the oppressed, but also the vigilance of the victims of oppression. In this way the coherence of the imaginary of the stereotype is fragmented by a plurality of different perspectives.

Under the vigilance of the Trujillo regime, a myriad of gazes opposed to the forces of oppression become manifest. The tragic figure of Oscar who lacks the charms of the Dominican Don Juan, for example, becomes a *paraguayo*, or a party watcher, a Dominican term for the American marines of the first U.S. occupation of the island from 1916 to 1924. Like the Americans who did not participate in the local dances, only watching the dancers, Oscar is an observer of his world. This distance allows him to identify with the marginalized of the diaspora. Thus, conscious of the multiple levels of his alterity at university, he watches “‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself” (264). As Foucault affirms, like any modern subject, each individual situates herself or himself with reference to the visible difference of others. That is, their subjectivity entails the external subjectification of others and then the interior subjection of the self. The resulting multiple tensions create fraught situations from which emerge spaces that undermine the authority of dominant discourse (778). Thus, Oscar is a witness of the auto-racism which is at once the internalization and the subversion of the stereotype as fetish and Imaginary.
Like Oscar, Yunior, the alter ego of Díaz, observes the North American world in which he fails to act with agency. He calls himself the humble Watcher, who is a character in one of Oscar’s favourite comics, The Fantastic Four (1961). As Yunior explains, Uatu the Watcher resides in the hidden Blue Area of the moon just as the marginalized who live, according to Glissant, on Earth’s hidden face (92). From the hidden side of the moon, Uatu the Watcher, at times villain and at other times superhero, supervises the Earth but promises not to interfere in the lives of human beings. Despite this promise, however, once in a while he uses his power to change the lives of earthlings. Therefore, as narrator/witness of the life of the León family, Yunior not only monitors the characters, but also becomes the Eye of authority over centuries of colonization and decades of globalization. In addition, like Uatu he has the ability to change the reality of his characters and by extension that of those they represent. In other words, Yunior/Díaz assumes the role of observer of the observers and in this way his narrative becomes a testimony to the past and present injustices of history. The multi-directional gaze of his characters constitutes a definitive breach within the binary ‘we’ and Other. Thus, the integrity of the Imaginary ‘I’ as a semiotic activity that strives to maintain order by subjecting the other under signs of alterity is also problematized by the return gaze of the oppressed.

The tension between the panopticon of dominant discourse and the splintered gaze of the subjugated precipitates another effect of hegemonic discourse: mimicry. A means of encountering an Other at once different and similar, or in Bhabha’s terms “almost the same, but not quite” (LC 86), mimicry produces a slippage of identity which destabilizes official constructs of belonging. The mimicry of the oppressor by the marginalized subject displaces the authority of the former who sees himself as doubled with a difference and threatened by this challenge to his authenticity (LC 91). Therefore, when Oscar imitates the
machismo of the Trujillo regime by propositioning women on the street, the border between resemblance and difference becomes unclear as his imitation characterizes both the dictator and the stereotype. Similarly, while Yunió tries to perform his Dominican masculinity, his failed relationships reflect Oscar’s frustration in his search for love and make a mockery of the image of the macho Latino. Likewise, the masks that Lola and the other female characters wear belie the existence of other possible selves. The mimicry, then, serves as a mask not of the characters’ own authenticity but of their awareness of a lack of authenticity as although power relations produce the mimic, she or he has no political agency. Bhabha contends that this type of mimicry is not a desire to change identity but an act of camouflaging that has a doubling effect “that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (LC 90).

The double vision of this repetition calls into question the identity of the imitated subject for it reveals the ambivalence of hegemonic discourse and thus upsets its authority (LC 88). Therefore, the vigilant Eye of hegemony in Oscar Wao is not a complete presence but a partial and virtual one that is disturbed by the return gaze of the oppressed; the observer becomes the observed and this process reveals a plurality of identities without a fixed essence. Thus, between imitation and mockery emerges “a writing” that subverts the official narrative of history and the representation of an incontestable ‘truth’ (LC 87).

The paradox of the stereotype as a tool is that it fixes the image of the Other while at the same time fracturing it is that it blurs the borders between the oppressed and the oppressor. Repeatedly passing from an object of pleasure to a threat, the Other problematizes the identity of those who exercise authority as it displaces its own imposed identity. According to Bhabha, the consequent ambivalence opens up space for resistance:
If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion... that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (LC 112)

Hybridity, then, can lead to resistance by inverting the disavowal of the Other so that counter-hegemonic narratives can emerge (LC 114). However, this resistance is not simply the negation of dominant discourse but the result of an ambivalence in the signs that articulate cultural differences. The required space for this articulation is the “Third Space of enunciation,” a split space in which the production of meaning involves “the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious” (LC 36). That is, since in this space cultural signs are neither uniform nor of fixed meaning, it is possible to appropriate them to create narratives that oppose the notion of culture as static and fully comprehensible. Therefore, these narratives do not value the past as a history of the origin of a homogenous nation but as time that is recuperated to “redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality, to touch the future on the hither side” (LC 7). Thus, the temporal and spacial effect of the structure of difference creates a culture that is always in a process of becoming.

To support this notion of the mutability of culture, Bhabha cites Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as an imagined community that cannot exist without its texts which determine its limited and sovereign character (Anderson 7). The nation is the work of the regime, and without its texts the structures of power that produce and impose one history for the various
communities of a particular territory cannot exist. The manipulation of the collective imagination by dominant discourse is realized through texts whose narratives suppress the voices of the inhabitants of a geographic region. Nevertheless, although the written history of a country may include deliberate falsifications of events or only traces of the ‘truth’, what is significant is the way in which history is revealed in the present where identities are formed (Anderson 6).

Anderson insists that paradoxically, it is the very ephemeral quality of the nation that engenders a cultural disjunction which permits individuals to undermine the official national imaginary. In other words, the narrative of a nation is always fluid and cannot only be preservation or innovation but an exploration of present life. Thus, according to Bhabha, nationalism is understood as a product of cultural systems to which it is opposed (LC 158). Culture is not the unification of a nation but the writing that creates a doubling of the cultural sign as identity in différance in the Derridean sense.

Referring to Derrida’s observation that the history of the decentered subject and her/his dislocation from the ontology of the West coexists with the problematic of cultural difference, Bhabha insists that a cultural politics of the diaspora cannot be approached without “those metonymic or subaltern moments that structure the subject of writing and meaning” (LC 59). Thus for Bhabha the gap between the sign and symbol is a space for transforming language to reinscribe the past for the creation of counter-hegemonic narratives. That is, the novel as transformative art never merely recalls the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent but refigures it as a contingent interstitial space that alters the performance of lived experience (LC 7). As we will see in the next chapter, this notion that texts perform mutable commonalities across temporal registers is key to understanding the ways in which Oscar Wao subverts narratives that imagine the nation as a stable, unified community.
Chapter 3: Devouring the Word: Intertextuality and the Transformative Text

In *The Man Without Content* (1999), Agamben insists that art is the expression of existence in a shared community. Moreover, it is a practice that can bring potentiality into actuality as long as *poiesis*, to produce or bring into being, and *techne*, to do or act, are not separated from shared human experience (42). That is, transformative works of art participate in the ongoing production of humanity as part of, yet distinct from the material world. However, he laments the current reduction of art to a commodity for the entertainment of the individual spectator. The fact that today a work by Goya has value as an object in itself means that it and the spectator are no longer engaging in the creation of community. In other words, true art cannot be divorced from community. In the Middle Ages for example, it was inconceivable for art to have value in itself as wonder in art was a vehicle for the artist and audience to access human consciousness and therefore potentiality:

The wonderful was not yet an autonomous sentimental tonality and the particular effect of the work of art, but an indistinct presence of the grace that, in the work, put man's activity in tune with the divine world of creation, and thus kept alive the echo of what art had been in its Greek beginnings: the wonderful and uncanny power of making being and the world appear, of producing them in the work. (22)

The urgency in Agamben’s text expresses a fear that in the disconnect between art and shared human experience, art becomes an exercise in aesthetics that fails to show human beings as creative creatures with the potential to transform the world. Nevertheless, his interest in art is reassuring as he continues to see its restorative qualities vis-à-vis humanity as part of the shared world.
As Agamben promotes the dissolution of exclusive borders between human beings, the novel as transformative art becomes a means of engaging in a dialogue about what it means to be part of a commonality. This idea that connections between language and materiality perform the world coincides with Glissant’s notion of chaos monde “when words, no one’s fiefdom, meet up with the materiality of the world, [and] Relation is spoken” (Glissant 202). Nevertheless, the conversation only becomes a spectacle for the individual if the text is merely a practice of poiesis and techne removed from social contexts. He shares Bhabha’s belief that the borderline work of culture demands the enactment of the ambivalences and ambiguities of the world in fictions that affirm a profound desire for social solidarity (Bhabha, LC 18). That is, through texts that transcend boundaries we can engage in a dialogic of accountability to transform our concept of being in the world so that belonging is no longer founded on exclusivity but on inclusivity. Only texts that do not separate art from shared experience can invite the reader to participate in the transformation of daily existence, for in these texts univocality becomes the polyvocality of an assemblage of irreducible identities. In The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the dissonance of voices that Díaz gleans from multiple discourses creates a narrative that is not mere imitation or representation of previous works but an expression of shared potentiality.

3.1 Textual Cannibalism as an Act of Renovation

In 1928 Oswald de Andrade published his “Cannibalist Manifesto” in which he criticized European literary canon and called for the creation of a distinct Brazilian cultural reality:
“Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The world's single law. Disguised expression of all individualism, of all collectivisms. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties. Tupi or not tupi, that is the question” (38). The humorous and provocative allusion to
Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* preserves the existential angst of the play while transforming it to reveal other ways of being. In the manifesto, Hamlet’s dilemma becomes a question of the survival of a Brazilian culture that must choose between a cannibalistic ingestion of other cultures to transform itself, or the cultural erosion imposed by European hegemony. Thus, as an example of literary cannibalism, Andrade’s declaration presented an alternative to the cultural assimilation that privileged one culture over others.

However, what is the manifesto’s relevance in the globalized world of the twenty-first century? Since its publication, the cultural contamination of communities across the globe is without precedent. As a result, texts are equally contaminated by various influences that affect both writers and readers, whether they are conscious of this or not. In “The Ecstasy of Influence” (2007), a response to Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Jonathan Lethem celebrates plagiarism insisting that appropriation and originality cannot be separated:

“Appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a sine qua non of the creative act, cutting across all forms and genres in the realm of cultural production” (61). Nevertheless, while plagiarism is inherent in the creative act and intertextuality characterizes texts the world over, authors consciously appropriate texts for different reasons. I propose that the intertextuality of *Oscar Wao* involves not only appropriation but linguistic and literary cannibalism. Going beyond the literary plagiarism practiced by many, Junot Díaz employs intertextuality as a tool for the rewriting of past and present narratives of the Dominican diaspora. In this way Díaz answers Andrade’s call for cultural anthropophagy as a means of subverting cultural imperialism while promoting new Latin American realities. Díaz’s syncretic text presents a ‘Tupi’ dialogism offering a rhizomatic counter-narrative to dominant discourse to reveal the injustices of colonization and globalization and open spaces of agency for the
communities of the Dominican diaspora.19

3.2 Anthropophagy and Cultural Renewal

Andrade’s reappropriation of the term ‘anthropophagy’ for cultural renovation transforms the image of the cannibal as a symbol of Brazilian culture seen as primitive, static, and condemned to dissolution. Rejecting a nationalism that imagined a ‘pure’ Brazilian culture immune to contamination, Andrade proposed the incorporation of other cultural practices to guarantee a fluid but definitively Brazilian identity. Thus, ritual cannibalism became a metaphor for cultural appropriation including the complex ambivalence produced by the desire and repugnance for the Other who aimed to create a viable identity. For Andrade, then, anthropophagy was not an act of violence but an aggressive, tactical strategy for cultural resistance.

In “Cannibalist Manifesto,” the use of anthropophagy as a metaphor for resistance redefines Brazilian alterity and underscores the destructive power of the global market that consumes cultures and homogenizes communities on the ‘periphery’. Thus, the representations of indigenous peoples in the texts of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and in the testimonies of Hans Staden and others in the sixteenth century are transformed into images of a developed culture victimized by hegemony: “[W]e had divination. We had Politics . . . [a]nd a social system in harmony with the planet” (42). Therefore, Andrade preserves the ritualist character of cannibalism described by Jean de Lery in 1578 who marveled at the harmonies of indigenous songs during the gustatory act: “Their tunable singing was so sweet . . . that I was . . . ravished

19 Appropriating the rhizomatic thought of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Glissant affirms that, "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (Glissant 11).
out of myself . . . [and] my mind rejoiceth” (2). Furthermore, Andrade approaches Michel de Montaigne’s argument in “Of Cannibals” (1580) which describes the anthropophagy of the Tupinamba not as barbarism but as a practice of civilized communities: “I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country.”20 Here in anthropological terms, the practice of anthropophagy is set on an equal footing with European customs. The Other is recognized as that which is not the ‘I’, but both are human beings deserving of equal rights. Similarly, for Andrade barbarism does not exist, only cultures with distinct practices.

As Andrade recognized that all cultures have potentially positive qualities, he advocated the consumption of foreign customs, or in his words, the “[a]bsorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into a totem” (43). According to Sigmund Freud in Totem and Taboo (1918), the ingestion of the human body as a ritual is not an instinctive act but a practice that involves the incorporation of another’s remains to attain his or her admirable qualities for the renewal of both body and spirit (95). Applying this analysis to Andrade’s manifesto, then, through the strategic absorption of other cultures, eliminating the negative and appropriating the positive, society is nourished culturally to engender a unique Brazilian identity. Therefore, valuing the African and indigenous contribution to Brazilian culture, Andrade makes the taboo of anthropophagy his totem. In the same way that Andrade conceives of cultural anthropophagy, Díaz incorporates various lexicons and texts in his novel and transforms them in an act of resistance for cultural renewal.

20 In his manifest, Andrade insists that without Brazil Europe would not have its “meager” declaration of human rights since it was based on Montaigne’s essay, which describes anthropophagy as a practice even more civilized than those of the military forces of Europe (39).
Andrade’s resistance to an imposed modernity by advocating cultural anthropophagy prefigured Bhabha’s notion of hybridity and the belief that a viable sense of cultural identity could be realized with the transformation of cultural signs as a performative act. In *Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz answers both Andrade and Bhabha’s call for writers who intervene at the level of the sign to renew language. Oscar’s dream of becoming a writer of fantasy and his desire to experience romantic passion is key as this linking of the act of writing with love for another can protect his family from the curse of *fukú americanus*. With his novel Díaz proposes that the marginalized of the Dominican diaspora can resist their oppression with new texts that imagine alternative communities in which compassion for others forms the basis of human relations, whether they are conflictive or harmonious. The creation of narratives that impugn the official voice of the state offers a counterspell to the *fukú* curse; thus, in the voice of Yunior, Díaz introduces the novel with this hope directed at the reader:

Traditionally in Santo Domingo . . . anytime a fukú reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word . . . Zafa . . . [which] used to be more popular . . . in Macondo than in McOndo. Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book isn’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell. (6-7)

Here Díaz leaves no doubt as to his intention to reinscribe past and present narratives with his text written in Spanglish with elements of the magic realism of the literary ‘Boom’ of the 1960s
and the urban realism of the literature of the ‘new’ Latin America of the 1990’s. Therefore, from the novel’s beginning, Díaz indicates to the reader that his text is an attempt to transform the accepted paradigms of textual representation to open spaces of agency for the communities of the Dominican diaspora.

### 3.3 Linguistic Cannibalism

To transform the monolithic narratives of the official voice, Díaz begins by corrupting two colonial languages by writing in Spanglish. In addition, this hybrid voice is enriched with the vocabulary of other languages, as well as with his use of catachresis and neologisms. The resulting textual dissonance reflects the cultural syncretism of the Caribbean diaspora while subverting hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies.

First, the use of catachresis throughout the novel begins with the title. Inspired by Ernest Hemmingway’s short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1936), Díaz’s title immediately introduces a deferral of meaning in the doubling of the title of a western text. Like Oscar, Hemmingway’s antihero, Macomber, is a symbol of a fleeting resistance which both characters experience just before they are murdered. In addition, Oscar’s nickname Oscar Wao, is derived from Oscar Wilde’s name. Thus, as a social pariah Oscar “almost the same but not quite” his namesake is the ironic double of a writer whose “otherness” in British society contributed to the subversive texts in 19th-century England. The manner in which Oscar receives his name is a clear example of différance in language: Seeing his obese effeminate friend

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21 For a discussion of the preponderance of magic realism in the novel see Lopez-Calvo.
disguised as Dr. Who, a time traveler like his narrating self, Yunior compares Oscar to Wilde, the literary dandy par excellence who is ostracised by his community. However, one of his friends mispronounces the name and interpellates Oscar as a version of the tragic literary figure. Moreover, this version is itself unstable as a plurality of meanings is generated with each iteration of his name. Whether as *who, wow, woah, why, wild, while,* or *wile,* the play of vowels and consonants of Wilde’s name translated and enunciated in Dominican Spanish, or repeated in English reveal the *Entstellung* of the word: “a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, and repetition” (Bhabha, *LC* 105). Finally, the title of Díaz’s text itself becomes the acronym BWLOW associating his text with the flux of all that is below and between the imagined communities of the official mind. The slang term ‘blow’ also evokes the rupture of an imposed reality with the liberating intoxication of fiction. In this way, by appropriating the title of a canonical text, Díaz underscores the polysemic quality of the sign and the fluidity of language.

The ambiguity achieved through the manipulation of the sign in the title continues throughout the novel, giving it its linguistic power. By transforming language so that meaning becomes ambiguous, Díaz challenges the notion that identity is anything other than fluid. This ambivalence in the text obliges the reader to participate in the production of the potential meanings of the narrative. As Oscar and Yunior speak English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Elvish, and use the argot of a variety of countries, their bank of possible linguistic marks is infinite. New words such as *baká, gaijin, funtoosh,* and *geas* are not put into italics and appear out of context and without a gloss. In this way, the text engages the reader to approach Oscar’s incomprehensible world and participate in accessing and producing possible meanings in the

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22 *Baká* is Japanese for ‘crazy’ or ‘fool’ and according to Dominican folklore a creature or demon created by witchcraft. *Gaijin* is Japanese for ‘foreigner’. *Funtoosh* is a Hindi expression meaning ‘finished’ or ‘washed up’. *Geas* is an Irish Gaelic term meaning a magically imposed obligation.
narrative for the reinscription of the history of the Dominican Republic. That is, borrowed from other lexicons and appearing without warning to confound the passive reader, the new words break the linguistic chains founded on causality that fix the limits of language. Thus, the reader must re-examine her or his concept of language and culture by making new connections between irreducible signifiers and signified. Whether obliged to investigate meanings for these words or admit ignorance, the reader becomes conscious of other realities outside her or his own.

The polyphony of appropriated signifiers in the novel also emerges in Díaz’s use of the hyperbole of derogatory terms. For example, the constant repetition of degrading labels such as ‘nigger’, negro, toto, maricón and puta render them almost inoffensive, as if they lacked their recognized semantic value. Traditionally, the use of these words by dominant culture facilitates the physical and psychic oppression of the marginalized. However, while they are used as insults by hegemonic discourse, they are also used within marginalized communities as a way of reappropriating language to affirm social and cultural differences. In Oscar Wao, the Hispanic narrator further complicates the use of these terms by directing them at the reader, thereby subverting the boundaries of race and sex so that the reader recognizes herself or himself and at the same time identifies with the oppressed. This appropriation of pejorative language linked to the artificial constructs of race and sex transforms it into a rejection of the stereotypes that identify human beings as immutable subjects. In this way, language acquires new meanings that destabilize the language of oppression. As Bhabha affirms, it is “the ironic naming, the interrogative repetitions . . . [that] create a discourse of cultural difference that marks ethnicity as the struggle against ethnicist ‘fixing’” (LC 246). Thus, with the repetition of unfamiliar lexical items and despective slang Díaz refashions language as a means of negating the required context for discourse that distinguishes Others as inferior and alien subjects.
Another way in which Díaz makes use of the gaps between signs and referents to destabilize dominant narratives of belonging is with neologisms and other forms of semantic extension. With these new locutions, Díaz engages in the ironic naming that alters meaning. For example, Yunior uses the term “The Untilles” rather than ‘The Antilles’ to refer to the amnesia of the Dominican population and their invisibility in dominant narratives (259). In addition, he invents the greeting “Hail, Dog of God” as a translation of Ave Dominicanis, a corruption of the Latin Ave Dominus (171). Here Díaz parodies the texts of the Discovery of the ‘New World’ and their representations of the indigenous Caribs as cynocephalic cannibals. Finally, the curse fukú americanus, or ‘fuck you America’, becomes a linguistic counterspell to the official texts of the imagined community of the nation. Díaz’s ludic tone and hybrid language create strata of meaning that undermine hegemonic discourse and invite the reader to imagine other communities and their narratives.

3.4 Literary Cannibalism

Just as the innovative use of language in Oscar Wao displaces the arbitrary fixation of signifier and signified, the intertextuality of Yunior’s narrative undermines the absolutism of the official history of the Dominican diaspora. Revealing the dissonance of his literary cannibalism, Díaz breaks with the literary canons and exposes narratives that impugn the metanarrative of official rhetoric. Due to the weaving of classical and popular texts, from Greek myths to comic books, and elements of the literary movements of Macondo and McOndo, his narrative defies

23 In a diary entry for the 4th of November, 1492, Christopher Columbus describes an encounter with the indigenous people of Bohío (Hispaniola): “Entendió también que lejos de allí había hombres de un ojo y otros con hocicos de perros que comían los hombres y que en tomando uno lo degollaban y le bebían su sangre y le cortaban su natura” (Colón 25).
classification. Referring to the latter two in particular, Díaz describes his conception of the text: “I’m thinking, like a Caribbean, why can’t we have ‘em both simultaneously? So this book was an attempt to put Macondo and McOndo on the same page, in the same sentence, sort of to prove that you can’t write the American experience, our American experience, by banning one set of passports in the process of privileging another” (“The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao”). This rejection of the imposed limits of genre—and identity—reflects his preoccupation with the mutable realities of the Dominican diaspora. Thus, the majority of the more than fifty authors that appear in the novel are interested in the errant subjectivities of the marginalized. Writers such as Walcott, Cervantes, Glissant, Ortiz, Melville, Álvarez, Tolkien, Morrison, Walker and Rushdie, for example, are points of cultural reference that independently of temporal and spatial contexts speak to the suffering of the oppressed subject.

The diversity of the voices that emerge from the text reveals a ‘dialogized heteroglossia’, which for Mikhail Bakhtin describes the inclusion of multiple socio-cultural perspectives within a text. The stratified voices of past and present signifiers and signified coexist to give it meaning which is constantly being reconstructed as new voices are added to the mix (272). This dialogism inherent in the formation of both the ‘I’ of the writer and the ‘I’ of the reader involves a polyphony of texts whose voices alternate to form a hybrid narrative. A Spanglish-infused novel that aims to inspire the desire to transform the present, Díaz’s narrative presents “two language intentions, two voices and two accents participating in an intentional and conscious artistic hybrid” (360). As new voices are added to the dialogue recognizing the existence of other consciousnesses, its “multi-languagedness” subverts authoritarian discourse because it rejects “the absolutism of a single and unitary language” (366). Thus, in Oscar Wao the official history of the diaspora is juxtaposed with the fictions of literary canon, the texts of popular culture, and
orality to create a literary bricolage whose plurivocality goes beyond the limits of hegemonic representation. As a result, the novel reflects the dissonance of the voices of the Dominican diaspora which are always in the process of emerging as the narratives of other imagined communities.

As Díaz’s aim is to open space for the suppressed narratives of the displaced communities of the diaspora, he appropriates texts that problematize dominant ideology and the suffering inflicted on the marginalized. As we have seen, he introduces the novel with two key epigraphs: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus??” taken from the comic *The Fantastic Four* (1961), and a verse of Derek Walcott’s “The Schooner ‘Flight’” which ends, “I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, and either I’m nobody or I am a nation.” In this way, Díaz presents the theme of the search for agented space in a violent, transient life perpetuated by hegemony. Thus, the story of Oscar’s coming of age is a narrative that resists the language and structure of the traditional *bildungsroman*. Unlike the classical story of the young European male who is obliged to learn the mores of society to maintain existing power structures, Oscar must resist social norms to gain personal agency. At the beginning of the non-linear text, references to historical contexts in the frequent footnotes suggest the subordinate role of officially sanctioned historical texts in which the ‘facts’ present an uncontestable truth. Yunior’s narrative has the principal voice on each page in which accounts of historical facts in small font and elaborated with his ludic tone gradually become shorter until they finally disappear. Thus, in imitation of a story of apprenticeship but written in Spanglish as a means of distortion, the novel manifests what Bhabha insists is “a form of defensive warfare. . . [w]hen the words of the master become the site of hybridity . . . [and] we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain” (121). As a result, with an intervention at
the level of the sign, Díaz follows Andrade’s example, appropriating literary tradition and transforming them not to speak for but beside those whose histories have been erased.

Díaz’s reluctance to assume the role of spokesperson of the Dominican diaspora reveals his preoccupation with the impossibility of attributing transparency to any representation of diasporic communities. In the voice of Yunior he observes, “Who can keep track of what’s true and what’s false in a country as baká as ours” (139). Thus, in true Derridean style, Díaz constantly deconstructs texts to erase the borders between facts and fiction and thus undermines any understanding of history as a monolithic truth. As Julia Kristeva affirms, referring to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, the ambivalence of language does not accept the affirmation of an uncontestable truth and the simple communication that attempts to silence the multiple voices of a society: “In Bakhtin’s work . . . dialogue and ambivalence, are not clearly distinguished . . . [for] any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (Desire 66). In this way, Kristeva criticizes the logocentrism of the occident that refuses to accept the polyglot character of novels such as Oscar Wao whose ambiguity, rather than reducible meaning, fosters new realities. In agreement with Andrade who affirms “we never permitted the birth of logic among us” (39), Díaz does not believe that reason plays a role in the conditions of the Dominican diaspora. That is, as a text cannot be reduced to influences or sources, intertextuality is practice

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24 Intersubjectivity implies that the meaning of a text is transferred from the writer to the reader rather than mediated through codes imparted to both by other texts, that is, by intertextuality.
and production, or what Hannah Arendt terms ‘praxis’. More importantly, in *Oscar Wao* this praxis involves a cannibalistic process that demands the transformation of mutable signifiers and not only their appropriation.

### 3.4.1 Distorting the Realism of the Dictator Novel

A key example of Díaz’s cannibalistic praxis is manifested in the fact that the writer chose to write what appears to be a dictator novel, a genre explored by writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Augusto Roa Bastos, Gabriel García Márquez, and Julia Álvarez. These authors form part of Díaz’s text as what Kristeva terms an *ideologeme*, that is, as product of and continuous producer of the socio-political and historical reality of Latin America. However, the dictator novel of Mario Vargas Llosa, *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000) plays a more salient role in Díaz’s novel as it was conceived in part as a critical response to Vargas Llosa’s text. In an interview with the Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat in 2007, Díaz berates Vargas Llosa:

You better believe that I was fucking with other books written about the Dominican Republic. I mean, have you read *The Feast of the Goat*? Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on that novel like it was the greatest thing on earth! Call me a . . . hater, but Vargas Llosa’s take on the Trujillo regime was

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25 Julia Kristeva explains the idea of praxis in this way: “Only action as narration, and narration as action, can fulfill life in terms of what is ‘specifically human’ about it” (*Hannah Arendt* 8).


27 According to Kristeva, “The concept of text as *ideologeme* determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history. The ideologeme of a text is the focus where knowing rationality grasps the transformation of utterances (to which the text is irreducible) into a totality (the text) as well as the insertions of this totality into the historical and social text” (qtd. in Allen 37).
Here Díaz rejects Vargas Llosa’s text that reads as a realist narrative in the style of Robert Crassweller, the author of *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator* (1966). In this biography, the dictator is not only the focus of the oppressive power of the regime but also its complete incarnation as an immoral human being with a certain admirable capacity for maintaining his power. In another interview in 2013 for *El País*, Díaz clarifies his position: “Vargas Llosa fracasa en el intento de llegar al fondo de la historia de un episodio muy importante de la historia de mi país. No consigue capturar en modo alguno los matices más sutiles de lo que significa vivir en una sociedad secuestrada como lo fue aquella” (“Cada joven”). Thus, for Díaz Vargas Llosa’s text is incapable of representing the complexities of life under the Trujillato for these stories exceed the limits of a realist narrative.

Díaz’s rejection of Vargas Llosa’s realism is key to understanding the intertextuality of *Oscar Wao* as an act of literary cannibalism that compels the reader to appreciate the complex character of Dominican history. Beginning with the plot of each novel, the authors appear to focus on two principal themes: the Dominican Republic under the tyranny of the Trujillato, and the brutality, in particular the sexual violence, propagated by the regime. In addition, they appropriate the myth of Trujillo as the quintessential Don Juan—comparing him to a goat, symbol in the Caribbean of pure indiscriminate sexual avarice—who satisfies his erotic appetite with innumerable victims. The consumption of bodies, whether male or female, becomes a

28 Victor Figueroa also discusses Díaz’s rejection of realism in Vargas Llosa’s text to arrive at a different conclusion.

29 See Lina del Castillo for an insightful examination of the ways in which animals have shaped narratives of Latin American histories and cultures.
metaphor for the auto-cannibalism of the state effectuated by Trujillo. Like Saturn devouring his son in Goya’s painting, the state feeds on the cadavers of its citizens to maintain a power that is ultimately self-destructive.

Despite these basic similarities, however, the distinctions between the two works are significant. In *La fiesta del Chivo*, the power of the dictator is presented as a product of the aspirations of a man whose dominion over the population ends with his assassination, hence the title referring to the celebration of the dictator’s death. Conversely, in *Oscar Wao* the oppression experienced during the Trujillato begins with the arrival of Columbus and continues long after the death of the dictator. In other words, for Díaz the power that Trujillo evokes is only one aspect of the complex matrices of power that continue to inform the experience of daily life in the Dominican diaspora. Therefore, while Vargas Llosa confirms the legend of the tyrant when his protagonist offers Trujillo a night with his virgin daughter to regain his favour, later sending her to the United States, Díaz refuses to follow his example:

Let’s be honest though. The rap about the Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island. . . So common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn’t have to do much except open his mouth to sift it out of the air. There’s one of these bellaco tales in almost everybody’s hometown. It’s one of those easy stories because in essence it explains it all. Trujillo took your houses, your properties, put your pops and your moms in jail? Well, it was because he wanted to fuck the beautiful daughter of the house! And your family wouldn’t let him! (144)

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30 After Trujillo’s assassination in 1961, the Dominicans celebrated by feasting on goat meat in a metaphorically cannibalistic act.
Unlike Vargas Llosa who perpetuates popular legend of the despotic dictator, Díaz dismantles the myth that ignores the history of colonization and globalization that facilitates his tyranny. Thus, in *Oscar Wao* the despot’s violation of women’s bodies not only reflects the cannibalistic acts of the state but also the insatiable appetite of the ‘West’ for the wealth of the island. As Yunior observes, “Trujillo wanted the Mirabel Sisters, and the Spanish wanted Anacaona” (244). In this way, in an act of literary anthropophagy Díaz transforms Vargas’s text for new interpretations of history, or in the words of Andrade for “Routes. Routes. Routes . . .,” that is, towards the rediscovery of Latin American realities (3).

To subvert the official version of the Trujillato reality, Díaz complicates the image of a society controlled by a man of great political and sexual power that belies the fraught history of the León family. Like the protagonist of the same name in *La fiesta del Chivo*, Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard Cabral, falls out of favor with Trujillo. He is a surgeon, an intellectual, and publically a Trujillista who turns a blind eye to the massacre of the Haitians in 1937; however, he is arrested at the height of his career, for unlike Vargas Llosa’s character he refuses to comply with the dictator’s wish to bed his daughter. Nevertheless, this act of defiance is not the reason for his imprisonment as his and his family’s ruin has less to do with sex and everything to do with language. As Yunior insists, the tragedy of the Cabral family “always begins in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad thing he said about Trujillo” (211). Opening the trunk of his car after drinking with his co-workers, Abelard jokes “I hope there aren’t any

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31 Anacaona was a Taíno cacica who resisted the Spanish and chose execution over accepting clemency if she would be the concubine of a Spaniard. She was hanged at the age of 29 in 1503.

32 Peter Abelard (1079 – April 21, 1142) was an erudite French radical who was persecuted for his philosophy. One of his texts, *Sic et Non (Yes and No)* presents an assemblage conflicting opinions on ecclesiastical doctrine with no intent to reconcile them. The ambivalence of his texts was perceived as a threat to the authority of the era.
bodies in here” (234). Articulated in front of a Packard, the same model of vehicle used to hide the bodies of Trujillo’s political opponents, this phrase is transformed by witnesses into “Nope, no bodies here, Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me” (235). This linguistic mutation of Abelard’s quip becomes a threat to Trujillo’s authority and results in Abelard’s brutal torture. However, while Díaz’s focus is on the power of language in a system where “one man’s jiringonza is another man’s life” (235), he proposes yet another version of the events. In this version, it is not speech but the written word that leads to Abelard’s perdition.

In the other interpretation of the fall of Abelard, the doctor was writing an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime, that is, of the “Dark Powers of the President” (245). In this book, he argued that the stories that “he was supernatural, that he was not human — may in some ways have been true” (245; italics in original). At first, Yunior dismisses this fantastical tale as “nothing more than a figment of our Island’s hypertrophied voodoo imagination” (246) only to make an about-turn with another reference to Vargas Llosa:

The Girl Trujillo Wanted might be trite as far as foundation myths go but at least it’s something you can really believe in, no? Something real. Strange, though, that . . . Trujillo never went after Jackie, even though he had Abelard in his grasp. . . .

Also strange that none of Abelard’s books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive. . . . You want creepy? . . . 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)

Here Díaz underscores the sinister character of Trujillo’s power which goes beyond realism to become fantasy reflecting a systemic violence that transcends the limits of place, time and reason. For Díaz, “el realismo es incapaz de captar las dimensiones más sutiles de todo un
entramado de emociones fugitivas, sentimientos espectrales que se producen en situaciones históricas extremas . . . En eso consiste el fallo de La Fiesta del Chivo” (“Cada joven”). Thus, it is not the supposed transparency of realism that allows the reader to imagine the realities of the tortured lives of the Dominican diaspora. In other words, realism in literature presents limitations that reality does not recognize. Therefore, insisting that “in Santo Domingo a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow” (245), Díaz appropriates the world of fantasy to depict the plurivocality of diasporan narratives that eschew the notion of fixed communities.

3.1.1 The Recuperation of Fantasy

Unlike the realist representation of Trujillo in Vargas Llosa’s novel, the dictator in Oscar Wao is only one possible manifestation among many in the history of violence that has traumatized generations of diasporic Dominicans. As previously mentioned, to portray the long-term repercussions of the fukú curse, embodied only in part by the dictator, Díaz compares Trujillo to Sauron, the diabolic necromancer of J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954): “He was our Sauron . . . our Once and Future Dictator, a person so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2). Like the sorcerer, the dictator maintains total tyranny over his victims with his ubiquitous presence. His lidless eye watches over the banal brutality of his regime in the Dominican Republic and abroad from his inauguration in 1930 and continues long after his death to the present day. Like the classic necromancer who feeds on the corpses of the dead to divine the future, the Trujillo regime depends on the consumption of its citizenry and the insidious destruction of communities in a cannibalistic act that sabotages any attempt to renew culture.
Nevertheless, while for Díaz fantasy allows the reader to access other narratives of the Dominican diaspora, the fukú curse surpasses make-believe as the latter is equally unable to provide a complete picture of the history of oppression. Therefore, Díaz transforms the incorporeal character of Sauron into a human being thereby rendering the figure of the dictator less tangible. However, like *La fiesta del Chivo*, Díaz’s text is incapable of representing the realities experienced by the Dominicans. As Yunior insists, “If you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it” (243). His novel portrayal of Trujillo and his enduring ghost is only one of many erased by the curse that came from Africa, “a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles . . . the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (1). At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, good conquers evil leaving the protagonists free of any lasting effects, but for Oscar’s family Trujillo is “too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily” (156).

The notion that Trujillo permeates life as a toxic force becomes more meaningful in his association with Galactus, the cosmic entity in the comic *The Fantastic Four* who devours planets to quench his insatiable appetite. Like Trujillo’s ghost, Galactus’s true form is elusive. Each galactic species, regardless of the epoch, sees the ‘Devourer of Worlds’ in a form they can comprehend rather than as mere energy. In addition, like Trujillo with his right-hand man “Demon Balaguer” (90), the antithesis of his inoffensive counterpart in “*La fiesta del Chivo,*” Galactus has an accomplice who collects lives for his consumption.33 As a result, there is no escape from his voracious appetite, and the only survivors, ‘The Wanderers’, are condemned to roam the universe. Thus, as a cosmic energy whose siblings are eternity and death, his

33 Díaz describes Joaquín Balaguer as “one of El Jefe’s more efficient ringwraiths . . . “who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora” (90). Balaguer was president for three terms: 1960-62, 1966-78, and 1986-1996. During his second term, the extreme violence carried out by the state resulted in the unprecedented emigration of Dominicans.
cannibalism remains destructive, equal to the deleterious effects of colonization and globalization. In both cases, the victims of a rapacious hunger are silenced by a reality that perpetuates the brutal marginalization of an errant population.

In spite of this somber portrayal of realities in the Caribbean and its diaspora, Díaz offers the reader hope for the transformation of life on the margins. The population displaced by Galactus can avoid his consuming energy with the help of four superheroes whose qualities Yunior, Oscar, Beli, and Lola share: a knowledge of texts; the capacity to transform the body, to become invisible, or to represent a human torch; and the potential to resist adversity with superhuman strength. However, this likening of Trujillo to a supervillain of popular culture and of the inhabitants of the Dominican diaspora to the Fantastic Four is not an affirmation of the dividing line between the subjugator and subjugated. On the contrary, Díaz makes the comparison to subvert the subject/object binary. As Foucault affirms, the subject is not revealed in relationships between masters and slaves, but in complex discourses in which the subjects of oppression are at once adversaries and allies. These capillary effects of the microtechnics of power break the limiting duality of oppressor and oppressed (72). Therefore, hegemonic control is never determined only by the master as authority is always divided, syncretic, and ambivalent; hence, the use of the figure of Galactus as Trujillo’s double is appropriate in Díaz’s text. Although he is unable to survive without the planets he consumes, the ‘Ravager of Worlds’ is an inherent part of the cosmos whose existence depends as much on the negative energies of the universe as on its positive forces. Evoking this interdependence of cosmic beings, Díaz describes the way in which the disenfranchised constantly negotiate existence so that it becomes a form of ordered chaos where boundaries remain porous.

This blurring of boundaries creates an ambiguity in the novel which obliges the reader to
reflect on accepted paradigms of morality. When Yunior discovers the *Watchmen* (1986) comic that Oscar takes to Santo Domingo where he is killed, the fine line between right and wrong becomes unclear. In the last chapter titled “A Stronger Loving World,” Oscar has circled the final conversation between Adrian Veldt, who has saved the world by destroying New York, and the scientist Dr. Manhattan, named after the Manhattan Project. Veidt asks, “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end.” To which the scientist responds, “In the end? Nothing ends Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (331). Here Díaz suggests the struggle against the forces of oppression is a continuous process that does not guarantee a universal good; the bombing of Hiroshima, for example, undermines the concepts of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and a fixed morality. Therefore, on the last day of his life Oscar sees a mongoose, as the incarnation of the *zafa* counterspell, and the faceless man, as the embodiment of the *fukú* curse, together on a bus. Thus, unlike the four superheroes whose virtue is incontestable, the integrity of Díaz’s characters remains ambiguous; as Lola laments, “Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (325).

The characters’ complicity with the Trujillo regime and the hegemonic discourse that they internalize as a means of surviving their subjugation appears as a warning to the reader. Abelard, for example, keeps silent until it is too late to speak while his daughter repeats, “*Tarde venientibus ossa,*” or “To the latecomers are left the bones” (219). As a result, he condemns generations of the León family to lives of mute suffering, hence Beli’s escape to the United States. However, in the equally oppressive American society she shows signs of post-traumatic stress, and unaware of her hidden past her children suffer under the shadow of her repressed anguish that ultimately manifests as cancer. For his part, Yunior adopts the machista norms

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34 *Watchmen* (1986) was written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons.
carried with the displaced to the United States where they become a means of labeling the marginalized. By doing so he sabotages his love for Lola and a close friendship with Oscar. Thus, with Lola’s collective ‘we’ Díaz invites his audience to recognize its complicity with the discourses of power that have silenced generations while admitting his own responsibility as writer.

For Díaz, the reader’s position within the matrices of power is equal to the relationship between writers and dictators. Therefore, through Yunior’s narrative voice, Díaz problematizes the notion that writers situate themselves on the ‘right’ side of morality, whether they perceive morality to be fixed or not: “Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that is too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like” (97). In other words, both writers and dictators have the power to create new worlds, but they do not necessarily assume responsibility for their actions. As Yunior affirms, the adage “[w]ith great power comes great responsibility . . . [is] bullshit” (94). That is, given the ambiguous nature of morality, a text can be destructive or transformative as it negotiates the blurred borders between right and wrong, and the writer must wield her or his power with care. Thus, Díaz is conscious of the limits of his art and insists that he cannot offer the reader a complete narrative. Yunior claims his story is “a zafa of sorts” against the fukú curse (7), and the phrase “of sorts” is key as it indicates the impossibility of creating a narrative that guarantees protection, i.e., change. As a testimony to past and present trauma, his narrative will fill the páginas en blanco of the book Oscar is unable to write before he is killed by state police (78). Nevertheless, he does not see his text as an antidote against evil but as a site of possible resistance from which the repressed voices of the Dominican diaspora can emerge to transform “the time of the now.”
As Yunior endeavours to break the silence “that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction” (243), he himself must become a literary necromancer. He consumes a palimpsest of texts to conjure a narrative that can transform the day-to-day existence of the marginalized. Thus, by incorporating both Macondo y McOndo literary elements he creates a polyphonic counter-narrative that promotes processes of transformation and agency. This is why Oscar’s only girlfriend asks in a truly Derridean manner, “Can something be impossible and not impossible at once?” (287). Here Díaz refers to the inconceivable love between Oscar and Ybón, a prostitute and the lover of a corrupt police officer, and to a novel that combines reality and fantasy. The final pages of his hybrid narrative describe the physical and spiritual connection between the unlikely couple whose love is “the cure to what ails us . . . The Cosmo DNA” (333). Therefore, concurring with Andrade for whom the cannibal instinct “[c]arnal at first . . . becomes elective and creates friendship [and] [w]hen it is affective, it creates love” (43), Díaz ends the novel with the possibility of a passion that transcends the limits of subjectivity.

Affirming a profound desire for social solidarity, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao answers Agamben’s call for art as the expression of human potentiality. The linguistic and literary cannibalism of Díaz’s novel enacts the ambivalences and ambiguities of lived experience that determine the permeability of borders between communities. In his rhizomatic text, the focus of language moves from a set of supposedly fixed meanings to the emergence of new signs of agency. The resulting polivocality undermines official memory to offer readers a means of establishing a dialogue as to the meaning of ‘community’. By thus promoting a conversation between irreducible singularities, Díaz’s ‘Tupí’ dialogism subverts the politics of polarity so that we recognize the Other and emerge the others of ourselves. Therefore, in a genuinely
anthropophagic act, Diaz transforms Kurtz’s final cry in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) so that Oscar’s last words become “The beauty! The beauty!” (335).  

Díaz’s text also evokes another seminal German work, *The Tin Drum* (1959) by Günter Grass. The marginalized protagonist of this unconventional *bidungsroman*, Oskar Matzerath, also attains a sense of self by resisting dominant discourse. His last words, “Better start running, the Black Cook’s coming! Ha! Ha! Ha!” become a carnivalesque defiance of death and an affirmation of life.

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35 Díaz’s text also evokes another seminal German work, *The Tin Drum* (1959) by Günter Grass. The marginalized protagonist of this unconventional *bidungsroman*, Oskar Matzerath, also attains a sense of self by resisting dominant discourse. His last words, “Better start running, the Black Cook’s coming! Ha! Ha! Ha!” become a carnivalesque defiance of death and an affirmation of life.
Chapter 4: Inextinguishable Longing for Elsewheres: Actualizing Potentiality in the Chaos of the Caribbean

The intertextuality of *Oscar Wao* blurs the line between fantasy and fiction to evoke the mutable communities of the Dominican diaspora. This crossing of linguistic and literary borders enacts the lived experience of the displaced whose lives are complicated by the problematic nature of cultural interaction. One of the most prolific scholars to examine intercultural exchange in the Caribbean was Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. In his seminal work *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), he coins the term *transculturación* to describe the complex interchange between Western and Afro-Caribbean cultures in Cuba. Rejecting the concepts of acculturation and deculturation that privilege dominant culture, Ortiz sees transculturation as a term that better expresses life in cultural ‘contact zones’.36

Entendemos que el vocablo transculturación expresa mejor las diferentes fases de una cultura a otra, porque no consiste solamente en adquirir una distinta cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz angloamericana aculturación, sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial desulfuración, y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse de *neoculturación*. (260)

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36 In *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt describes a “contact zone” as “the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (8).
Thus borrowing from the Malinowski school of anthropology, Ortiz maintains that cultural interaction produces new ways of being that retain something of their parent cultures while remaining distinct from each.

In his analysis of Cuban transcultural identity, Ortiz juxtaposes the cultural homogenization that sugar production in Cuba imposes on its product and workers with the heterogeneity of tobacco production. This counterpoint presents sugar and tobacco production as metaphors for hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Using fantasy to better depict the Cuban experience, he likens the mechanistic sugar mill operation to a Cyclops, much like Foucault’s panopticon, and its railway systems to octopi with tentacles (53). In control of every aspect of production, the overseers of sugar processing demand the uniformity of carefully measured packages of whitened cane syrup. In tobacco production, on the other hand, producers value the uniqueness of each tobacco plant which "no contiene una cantidad fija de tabaco, ni por el número y tamaño de las hojas, ni por su volumen, ni por su peso, ni por su calidad" (39). This singularity subverts the sugar producers’ monolithic approach to production control, for unlike the sugar plantation hands working for absentee landlords, tobacco workers can own small plots of land directly. More importantly, while sugar production imposes conformity, tobacco cultivation promotes a commonality of differences. Long before colonialism, smoking tobacco had religious significance for African and indigenous communities and soon became a shared practice for the subjugated in Cuba who continue to value their respective traditions. This custom and the European demand for the profitable ‘New World’ product ensured the intercultural contamination of diverse peoples from which there emerged communities characterized by "infinito polimorfismo" and "irreducible individualismo" (29).
The mutable Cuban communities made up of diverse cultures, however, did not realize an idyllic harmony. On the contrary, for Ortiz the conflictive nature of diversity is the other side of convivial experience as transculturation involves the "doble trance de desajuste y de reajuste, de desculturación o exculturación y de aculturación o inculturación y al fin de síntesis, de transculturación" (93). This synthesis precludes cultural homogeneity so that transculturation remains an ongoing performance of identity in transition and as such involves both the collision and merger of subjectivities.

This notion of the complementarity of Cuban identity is further developed by Antonio Benítez-Rojo in *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (1989). Reformulating Ortiz’s counterpoint by analysing Caribbean and Western cultures through a postmodern lens, he proposes that Ortiz’s counterpoint dialectic remains valuable as a point of departure for understanding the complexities of day-to-day life in the Antilles. However, affirming that Ortiz’s discourse “desea hablarnos de lo cubano, y por extensión, de lo caribeño” (152), he insists the discourses of sugar and tobacco are more relational than binary so that flux rather than polarity characterizes Caribbean life. That is, Benítez-Rojo extends Ortiz’s notion of contrapunteo so that both discourses inform the process of transculturation which transcends postmodern notions of identity to become uniquely Caribbean. In *La isla*, then, whether of sugar or tobacco the plantation becomes a symbol of oppression and represents the multiple communities that were part of its system of production: “un sistema de ecuaciones fractales o una galaxia” with “rasgos diferenciadores en cada isla, en cada tramo de costa, en cada bloque colonial” (50-51). Here individual islands become part of the plantation system’s all-encompassing web throughout the Antilles. In this way, Benítez-Rojo unites the distinct experiences of the ‘sugar islands’ under the patriarchal hierarchy of “Plantation” discourse (180).
Benítez-Rojo’s notion of the Plantation allows him to problematize the power relations of the system. Like Ortiz, he discusses the myth of the machinery of the sugar mill, which he sees as an uncontrollable force in the Caribbean; nevertheless, his focus is the ambiguity of the power dynamics within the Plantation system. In particular, he insists that the promise of power ensures the complicity of Caribbean communities and the perpetuation of a patriarchal discourse that permeates daily life. Indeed, the forces that created the power structures are so entrenched, “tan hondos, tan complejos y tan tenaces . . . que suelen sobrevivir los más drásticos cambios políticos” (127). Thus, for Bentitez-Rojo while Western and non-Western cultural narratives have, as Ortiz suggests, influenced Caribbean culture in different ways, they are interdependent aspects of Antillean life. Therefore, the negative image of the sugar mill machinery can become a positive metaphor for Caribbean culture, which he describes as “una máquina de flujo y de interrupción a la vez; es una máquina tecnológico-poética” (xxiv). Neither Western nor purely autochthonous, this machine is born of “una sabiduría ‘otra’” where scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge coexist as differences within the same system (xxiii).

In Benítez-Rojo’s reappropriation of Plantation discourse, then, the line between object and subject is blurred as perspectives multiply and the system is at once ‘Other’ and ‘I’. To better describe the complementarity that occurs with this erasure of fixed boundaries, Benítez-Rojo alludes to the chaos theory of quantum physics where particularity and universality overlap (iii). The supposed order of the Plantation becomes a meaningful chaos in which each island of the Caribbean repeats itself “desplegándose y bifurcándose hasta alcanzar todos los mares y tierras del globo” so that with each iteration it engages in a new process of becoming (iv). As the chaos described in Glissant’s Poetics of Relation, this disorder predates postmodernism as a Caribbean discourse from which emerge new ontologies and epistemologies. This chapter examines the
ways in which Junot Díaz’s characters resist the Other/I duality as they negotiate the relational chaos of the Caribbean diaspora to realize ways of being that approach Agamben’s ‘whatever singularity’.

4.1 Bartelby’s Resistance: Impotentiality as Potentiality

In an interview in the Wall Street Journal, Junot Díaz describes the Caribbean as a labyrinth of shifting communities characterized by centuries of subjugation:

I don’t think you can be from the Caribbean and not know a certain amount about the apocalypse. The Caribbean is such an apocalyptic place, whether it’s the decimation of the indigenous populations by the Europeans, whether it’s the importation of slaves and their subsequent being worked to death by the millions in many ways, whether it’s the immigrant processes which began for many people, new worlds ending their old ones. (Díaz)

Here change in the Antilles is associated with suffering so that rather than ‘chaos’, the word ‘apocalypse’ better describes the lives of the disenfranchised. Nevertheless, although his terminology differs from that of Ortiz and Glissant, Díaz also portrays hegemony as intrinsic to the tangled skein of power relations in the Caribbean. In particular, however, his use of the tropes of darkness and light to depict the complementarity of forces in the Dominican diaspora approaches Agamben’s use of the same in “The Contemporary.”

For Agamben, the possibility of realizing agency requires the perception of “the light that strives to reach us but cannot” (46), which paradoxically occurs when one’s gaze is directed towards the darkness of one’s time. Only those who are able to distance themselves from the epoch, “who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust to its demands,” are able to perceive its
obscurity (40). The contemporary, then, experiences a singular relationship with his or her time adhering to it “through a disjunction and an anachronism” (41), and it is this disconnection that allows the contemporary to grasp her or his potentiality. Moreover, to be contemporary requires courage because it means focussing on the darkness of the epoch and perceiving the light that infinitely distances itself from us. That is, the darkness of the era is not a void or an absence of light but an actively produced state. It is a coming light, just like the darkness of the sky at night is the negative presence of light from galaxies that cannot reach the Earth (46). In Oscar Wao, the courage of Díaz’s tragic hero allows him to transcend borders and participate fully in the relational chaos of the diaspora so that he is able to glimpse the light of potentiality from the shadows of his marginal existence.

The darkness that the characters inhabit on what Díaz calls the blue side of the moon, or in Glissant’s terms “la face cachée de la Terre,” has permeated life in the Antillean archipelago for centuries (92). Therefore, although the León family see Abelard’s inadvertent criticism of Trujillo as the beginning of the fukú curse and the darkness that plagues them, Yunior suggests that the arrival of Columbus might be a better starting point for the malediction. Nevertheless, he insists that his version of events does not cancel out the family’s rendition, for the Caribbean comprises a plurality of cultural narratives: “Who am I to question their historiography?” (211). Moreover, these multiple histories become interconnected under the shadow of the hegemonic injustices obscuring the light of potentiality. Recounting her flight from Santo Domingo, Beli describes the inertia imposed by the darkness of the Trujillato: “There was no light and a whole ocean crushing down on you. But most people had gotten so used to it they thought it normal, they forgot even that there was a world above” (81). Here Yunior interweaves individual and common experience in Beli’s depiction of the ocean as a form of Antillean ether polluted by
oppression, for even after the death of Trujillo, a “great darkness” lingers and spreads throughout the diaspora (156). Thus, exposed by her bra resembling a torn sail, the scar on Beli’s back is “as vast and inconsolable as the sea” (51). In this way, the ocean becomes a dark liminal space where individuals have been disappeared since the ‘discoveries’ of the ‘New’ World and the slave trade, to colonialism and globalization.

As the fukú curse is a trans-oceanic phenomenon, Beli’s escape from “the grip of darkness [that] passed through her like a shade passes through life” in the Dominican Republic to the United States results in the entrenchment of her family’s oppression (160). In La Inca’s words, “the U.S. was nothing more and nothing less than a país overrun by gangsters . . . [and] [i]ts cities swarmed with machines and industry, as thick with sinvergüencería as Santo Domingo was with heat, a cuco shod in iron, exhaling fumes, with the glittering promise of coin deep in the cold shaft of its eyes” (158). Establishing herself in yet another darkness, her new family in New Jersey must navigate the shadows of progress that thwart their potentiality. Thus, Oscar matures on the fringes of a society that denies him agency and becomes a victim of state violence. Before his tragic end on a plantation, however, Oscar experiences personal agency on two different levels: first of impotentiality and then of potentiality.

As we have seen, the haunting of Oscar’s family by the fukú curse leaves each member mute regarding past trauma and continued anguish as they navigate their marginalized existence. Their fraught silence leads Oscar to fits of depression and a failed suicide attempt. However, rather than a sign of helplessness, this act of despair indicates a nascent potentiality as a means of resisting imposed narratives of identity. For Agamben, just as ‘whatever being’ always has a

37 A Cuco is a monster often appearing in the form of a zoomorphic dragon that devours children or represents the deceased of a community. Goya’s painting Que Viene el Coco (1799) depicts the mythical figure.
potential character, the being that is properly ‘whatever’ has the capacity to choose not to be. That is, it is a being equally capable of a conscious impotentiality, which is a potentiality whose object is potentiality itself. Agamben refers to Herman Melville’s Bartleby as an example of this taking of the right not to be; asked why he has stopped writing, the scribe answers, “I would prefer not to” thereby exercising his potential not to act (CC 35). Like Bartleby, Oscar chooses not to live according to the dictates of a society that oppresses obese black Latino nerds. He first makes this decision to reject conformity when he refuses to continue with Yunior’s weight-loss regimen. Yunior’s promise to change Oscar’s life flounders on a gruelling 6 a.m. run reminiscent of military training when Oscar suddenly stops and declares, “I’ve decided to run no more” (178). Over three days of badgering, he repeats “I’d rather not, I’d rather not” evoking Bartleby’s mantra. Thus, as a ghost in New Jersey, he elects to withdraw from the race of progress imposed by hegemony as his only means of exercising his will. This disengagement is facilitated by his inability to see himself connected to a society where “[e]verybody misapprehends me” (189). His refusal to participate in a social order that offers him no means of expressing his individual will results in a resistance characterized by a willed abjection rather than a violent opposition to the state. Therefore, in the same way that Bartleby’s isolation in the Dead Letter Office provokes an abject resistance, Oscar’s inability to communicate his needs to others leaves him no other recourse but to remove himself from a conversation that will never allow him to speak. However, like Bartleby, who is also described as a ghost in society, his determination not to abide by societal norms confounds narratives of a teleological trajectory of existence, and he becomes a threat to the system.

Oscar’s impotentiality becomes operative potentiality when he engages in an active resistance to the discourses that marginalize his community. As Agamben affirms, perceiving
darkness “is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability” (“Contemporary” 45). When Oscar renounces despair in favor of hope, he perceives the potentiality of light occluded by the darkness of his time. This hope appears as a “tremendous wind” that rips through the cane field “like the blast an angel might lay down on takeoff” (300). The same sudden gust that Beli feels when she realizes she has survived her own brutal attack, this rush of wind indicates the possibility of change amidst the violence of past, present, and future histories. This allusion to Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History and the storm of progress that occasions the horror of its glance even as it “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” serves to highlight both the possibility of social transformation and the precarious nature of Oscar’s potentiality (SW 392).

Recuperating after his first beating in the cane fields, Oscar begins to articulate his potentiality with a form of linguistic cannibalism: “One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he’d heard about his whole life might actually be true. Fukú. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*” (304; italics in original). Here the language of the oppressor becomes a tool for the creation of new counter-narratives. Nevertheless, it is not until Oscar summons the courage of the contemporary that he is able to realize his potentiality. Initially, although aware that he should “make like a Lola” and go back to the Dominican Republic and “Fuck the captain. Fuck Grundy and Grod. Fuck everybody,” fear inhibits him. Therefore, when he dreams of his mother and sister screaming for help in a cane field, he runs from them (306). Shortly after these nightmares, however, he comes across the line in *The Lord of the Rings*: “and out of Far Harad black men like half-trolls” (307), referring to Sauron’s black slaves. The line occasions an epiphany and he realizes that he must break the cycle of suffering that dominant discourse guarantees with such language: “[H]e
dreamed about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened” (307). By acting as a contemporary and listening to generations of silenced voices, Oscar accesses “some power of his own” and transforms the fukú curse into an act of defiance so that he breaks his mother’s silence and returns to Santo Domingo (319).

Oscar’s act of potentiality complicates his role as a victim in patriarchal society, but he cannot escape the rejection that is his due as an abject citizen. The abject provokes disgust, the desire to eliminate the object of this loathing, and the justification of violence. Even a passive abject agency such as Bartleby’s, which causes first fear and then repulsion, ends with his death at the hands of the law. Initially, Oscar is ‘eliminated’ by being rendered invisible, and then he opts out of the imagined national communities of the U.S. and the Dominican Republic by choosing not to follow the dictates of society; therefore, as a subject both inside and outside the laws of two national communities, he is caught in a cycle of violence from which it becomes impossible to break free. His exclusion from society, both forced and voluntary, leads to the violation of social norms which further compounds his marginality and justifies his arrest and execution. Indeed, neither American nor Dominican authorities recognize his death as a crime: “Four times the family hired lawyers, but no charges were ever filed. The embassy didn’t help and neither did the government” (323). In this way the state sanctioned violence against his political being has a domino effect that serves to strengthen the arm of sovereign law to the extent that his very physical being is threatened and he is murdered as homo sacer.
4.2 Zafa and the Light of Potentiality

From his liminal position within the imagined community of the state, Oscar summons the courage to grasp potentiality in kairological time and becomes an example of Agamben’s contemporary. With his brave return to the Dominican Republic to pursue a forbidden relationship with Ybón, he perceives, if only fleetingly, the light occluded by the darkness of his epoch. That is, his potentiality as praxis, rather than mere contemplation, serves as a counter-spell or zafa to the fukú curse. In Oscar Wao, Díaz associates the recurring trope of light with transformation; however, his characters only apprehend this light when they are focussing on the darkness of their time and limits are strained or surpassed.

The light of possible change for life in the Dominican diaspora first appears in the León family history when Abelard’s love for his child, Beli’s sister, forces him to do a “Brave Thing” (217): he keeps her from any contact with Trujillo even though he has a reputation for being able “to keep his head down during the worst of the regime’s madness—for unseeing” (215; italics in original). Abelard’s quiet defiance of Trujillo eventually leads him to speak openly of his dissatisfaction with the regime and lie to the dictator when questioned about his absent daughter at a state function. In a moment of brilliance, he jokes that the despot would not be interested in his moustachioed girls, to which Trujillo responds with the expected bonhomie. Abelard’s impromptu repartee mimics the sexist language of the regime and he gains a temporary reprieve. However, he refuses to take credit for his quick-wittedness. When his wife asks him for the source of his inspiration, he claims it comes from “within my soul . . . From a Numinous being”; and when she asks if he means God, he answers, “I mean someone” (223). This ‘someone’ appears again when the light of a mysterious being accompanied by the voices of the past becomes the source of Beli’s salvation.
As Abelard’s daughter, Beli is the only survivor of her father’s “chiste apocalyptus” (233) and therefore also a literal “Child of the Apocalypse” (251). Orphaned as an infant, she becomes a restavek exposed to extreme violence at the hands of her adoptive family.\(^\text{38}\) Even when La Inca discovers her and brings her “out of the Darkness of those days and into the light of Baní” (82), she continues to be buffeted by the demands of patriarchy. Nonetheless, the light she perceives when rescued by her new mother continues to appear in her life. As Beli matures as the daughter of the Fall, i.e. Trujillo’s elimination of the Cabral family, and the recipient of its heaviest radiations, she longs for love and loves “atomically” (126). Diaz connects this longing to both her burning as a child and future joy and suffering so that ambiguity across temporal registers is always present. When she is dancing in El Hollywood club just before she meets the Gangster, for example, others shout “La negra está encendida. La negra está encendida indeed!” (114). The repeated phrase evokes the trauma of her childhood and foreshadows her doomed first love. Thus, the short chapter introducing this romance is titled “Kimota!” (89). The phonetic equivalent of ‘atomic’ reversed, Kimota is the word that the Marvel Comic character, the orphan Micky Moran, uses to transform himself from a reporter into Marvelman. This superhero struggles for justice and humanity and uses his writing skills to expose police corruption. Nevertheless, through this reference to atomic energy, and by extension the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, light and darkness constitute two inseparable elements of human experience. Thus, Beli’s love for the Gangster ends in a blackout in the canefield and the end of language as she is unable to hear the voices of the diaspora; however, when she comes to and recognizes her lover’s betrayal she becomes aware of their cries and another possible future.

\(^{38}\) From the French \textit{reste avec}, ‘stay with’, a restavek is a child who is sent to live with a family as an indentured labourer.
That is, only by focussing on the darkness of the epoch can she access her “Cabral magis” and the “coraje that save[s] her life. Like a white light in her. Like a sun” (148).

The light that Beli perceives as an internal force is complemented by an outside energy that Yunior describes as an extension of her own bravery. In the cane, she encounters a creature with “golden lion eyes” which contrast with the “absolute black of its pelt” (149). A mongoose with “chabine eyes,” it prevents her from falling into unconsciousness as it sings “*Yo me llamo sueño de la madrugada*” (150; italics in original). In a footnote, Yunior describes the Mongoose, also the name of a Marvel comic supervillain, as “one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travellers.” Like the ancestors of Walcott’s Shabine in the novel’s second epigraph, this creature “[a]ccompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean . . . [and] has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies” (151). As Beli drifts in and out of awareness, the voice of the Mongoose merges with that of the lead singer of a band who discovers her on the road. The splinter of light from the match he uses to see her as “a blunt-featured woman with the golden eyes of a chabine” is enough to convince him that he must save her (151). Confounding the voices of past and present trauma, his curious *cibaeña* accent evokes the northern region of the island where the Mirabel sisters held clandestine meetings to organize action against Trujillo.\(^{39}\) However, after Beli is rescued and her story circulates, locals become confused as to whether the Mongoose is the incarnation of a curse or a blessing. Moreover, while La Inca believes her adopted daughter has had an encounter with God, Beli is uncertain: “I met something” she says warily (152). Here Beli not only echoes her dead father’s words regarding

\(^{39}\) Three of the Mirabel sisters, Patricia, Minerva, and María were assassinated by Trujillo’s security forces in 1960.
the ‘someone’ that saved him at the presidential event, but also underscores the ambiguity that characterizes both their experience of its elusive presence. In this way, Díaz highlights the complementarity of light and darkness so that while one is perceived the other remains latent, precluding any notion of guaranteed stability for either. Thus, in keeping with Benítez-Rojo’s likening of the Caribbean to the chaos of quantum physics, not only are multiple realities always possible, but more importantly it is the observer that determines her or his experience of reality.40 In other words, while light and darkness are always present, the onus is on the contemporary to actualize potentiality.

As both the fukú curse and the zafa counterspell in Oscar Wao are integral to the Caribbean experience, they guarantee the instability of daily life in the Dominican diaspora. This volatility, however, is counterbalanced by a constant throughout the text: the notion that compassion for others, whether expressed orally or in written form, propels individuals towards affecting positive social change. Before Oscar is killed but not sacrificed, he exercises his potentiality by refusing to respect boundaries that attempt to separate individuals by classifying them as identifiable according to their race, sex, class, and culture. The impulse behind his transgressive behaviour, his raison d’être, is his longing for intimacy. When he falls for a hard core “luminous” Goth, a Boricua nicknamed La Jablesse,41 Yunior wonders at the transformative powers of his adoration, comparing it to “the light of a new sun” (182, 185). Later, after this platonic relationship ends and Oscar’s suicide attempts fails, Yunior relates how Oscar writes of

40 In 1935, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger devised his famous thought experiment in which a cat and a vial of poison are placed in a box. With a 50% chance of the vial breaking and poisoning the cat, over repeated experiments the cat is in a state of superposition i.e. alive and dead at the same time. Only when the box is opened and an observer sees the cat is the animal’s status determined: the observer affects reality.

41 La Jablesse is derived from the French creole La Diablesse or She-Devil, a deadly seductress with hooves.
his continuing despair in his journal: “That fall after the Fall was dark . . . dark” (200). However, while he once again contemplates taking his life, the memory of his sister Lola and their close connection keeps him open to the possibility of change: “[H]e] [d]rove so long and so far on some nights that he would actually fall asleep at the wheel . . . about to go all the way under and then some last alarm would sound. Lola. Nothing more exhilarating (he wrote) than saving yourself by the simple act of waking” (201).

While Oscar’s affection for his sister gives meaning to his life, the catalyst for his conversion from suicidal virgin to agented individual is his love for a prostitute. Described as a “golden mulata that French-speaking Caribbeans call chabines,” Ybón is “one whiteskinned relative away from jaba” with “snarled apocalyptic hair” and “copper eyes” (279).42 At this point in the novel, the trope of incandescent eyes evokes for the reader the figure of the Mongoose, whose “Aslan like figure with golden eyes” tries to speak to Oscar in dreams after their initial meeting during his attempted suicide (190). Reappearing in Oscar’s subconscious after his first beating in the cane field, the Mongoose asks Oscar, referring to his illicit love for Ybón, “What will it be, muchacho? . . . More or Less?” (301). After some hesitation at the prospect of further violence, Oscar remembers his family and the optimism of his childhood fueled by his Planet of the Apes lunchbox, and replies, “More”. Yunior then writes the Mongoose’s response as three blanks: “____ ____ ____, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him [Oscar] back into the darkness” (301). We later learn these are the same blanks that Yunior is unable to fill to express his love for Lola: “Before all hope died, I used to have this stupid dream . . . I’d finally say the words that could have saved us. ____ ____ _____. Before I

42 In the Dominican Republic, the word jaba is used to refer to a very light-skinned person of African descent.
can shape the vowels. I wake up. My face is wet, and that's how you know it’s never going to come true” (327). Unlike Oscar, Yunior is unable to break the bonds of conformity to pursue meaningful relationships with others. Only later with a woman he describes as a “wife I adore and who adores me, a negrita from Salcedo whom I do not deserve” can he begin to fill in Oscar’s “página[s] en blanco” (326, 78). Thus, in Oscar Wao love and language, or in Glissant’s terms a ‘poetics of relation’, are the means by which the light of potentiality is grasped in the chaos of the Caribbean.

While Oscar’s text remains either unwritten or lost, his oral interaction with Ybón and others has given him a viable sense of self. Just before he is shot, Oscar speaks to his assassins about his relationship with Ybón, telling them “that it was only because of her love that he’d been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they no longer could stop” (321). In other words, their love has transformed borders of exclusion into frontiers of communication. Facing his firing squad, Oscar is comforted by the knowledge that his actions have benefited others in kairological time: “Zafra would be here soon, and the cane had grown well and thick and you could hear the stalks clack-clack-clacking against each other like triffids and you could hear kríyol voices in the night” (320). Here, among creole voices he perceives the plantation as a place “strangely familiar to him” and has “the overwhelming feeling that he’d been in this very place, a long time ago.” In this unheimlich moment, “worse than déjà vu,” he sends telepathic messages to loved ones both past and present, positioning himself within a non-essentialized

43 Here Díaz heeds Benita Parry’s caution not to privilege textual representation over other forms of resistance (“Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse” 13-37).

44 Zafra is a term for the sugarcane harvest. Here Díaz transforms the hybrid triffid plants in John Windham’s novel, The Day of the Triffids (1951), into harbingers of revolutionary change that will benefit rather than destroy humanity.
community (298). Thus, facing his assassins for the last time, his words emerge from his mouth “like they belonged to someone else” (321). As his killers fade into darkness, Oscar’s last act is the translation of the word fuego into his final word “fire” (321). This occurs after Yunior tells the reader that Oscar’s favourite post-apocalyptic science fiction film Virus (1980) ends with the Japanese hero finally reuniting with “the love of his life” in Tierra del Fuego (307). In this moment Oscar’s knowledge of both languages and his desire to communicate result in his death; however, he has the last word, evoking a myriad of connotations both positive and negative but primarily in opposition to darkness.

4.3 Waiting to Begin: Actualizing Potentiality in the ‘Time of the Now’

As Yunior comes to the end of his version of diasporic life, it is clear that the character most adept at transcending imposed socio-political and cultural borders is Lola (326). Since the beginning of his account of Oscar’s short-lived agency born of a love for the abject, Lola is associated with the light of possible change and becomes zafa incarnate as she problematizes fixed ideas of race, culture, class, and gender. Thus, as an example of Agamben’s empowered contemporary she represents the potentiality of transgression in the Caribbean diaspora and invites the reader to question essentializing notions of community.

In The Coming Community Agamben describes the halo as a luminous radiance, a glow at the edges of matter, whether objects or living beings, that is a manifestation of their potentiality. As an inessential supplement and the “manifesting beside itself of each thing” (100), the halo indicates an otherness, in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality become indistinguishable” (54). However, this singularity is not a final determination of being but an “unraveling or an indetermination of its limits: a paradoxical individuation by indetermination”
(55). Similarly, for Díaz light appears at the conjunction of reality and possibility. Both Oscar and Lola occupy this liminal space; however, Oscar is “Caliban” whose alias is “Apokolips” while Lola is christened “The New Genesis” (170). By using the names of two of DC Comics planets coexisting in a Fourth World spawned by the death of old gods, Díaz highlights the overlap of dark and light, impotentiality and potentiality. Nevertheless, while Oscar’s potentiality is born of his impotentiality, Lola accesses her potentiality at a very young age and is associated with the bright planet and new beginnings.

From the first chapter of *Oscar Wao*, Lola’s ability to withstand the multiple pressures of life on the margins of society contrast sharply with her brother’s suffering. Yunior describes her as a reader and athlete who fights girls envious of her straight hair and slim nose as well as abusive boyfriends: “If a boy hit *me* . . . I would bite his *face*” (18; italics in original). As a teenager, she becomes a rebel, shaving her head to resemble Sinead O’Connor and passing as a lesbian (37), and at university she establishes herself as “a Big Woman on Campus . . . her hand on every protest and every march” (49). Moreover, she is anything but the quintessential Latina Yunior is attracted to:

Lola [was] like the fucking opposite of girls I usually macked on: bitch was almost six feet tall and no teats at all and darker than your darkest grandma. Like two girls in one: the skinniest upper body married to a pair of Cadillac hips and an ill donkey. One of those overachiever chicks who run all the organizations in college and wear suits to meetings. Was the president of her sorority, the head of S. A. L. S. A. and co-chair of Take Back the Night. Spoke perfect stuck-up Spanish. (169)

With a body whose gender is ambiguous, the poor black daughter of immigrants who looks
“more Hindu than Dominican” easily crosses class boundaries, becoming a success at university as she traverses the Pacific and Atlantic (52). Whether in the U.S., Spain, Japan, or the Dominican Republic, she is able to find a space of belonging that has little to do with national borders. Thus, Lola’s development is characterized by multiplicity, mutability, and a viable sense of self. When her narrative voice replaces Yunior’s, her preoccupation with the possibility of change manifests as “[b]right lights [that] zoom through you like photon torpedoes, like comets” (53). As a result, with her “jagged lightning-bolt part (74) and “tiger-colored irises” (35) to her mother she resembles fire (59). Like Agamben’s halo, this luminescence is a manifestation of her potentiality grasped as a result of her willingness to listen to the voices past and present that emerge from La Inca’s account of life under Trujillo.

The premonition of a transformation first comes to Lola at the age of twelve as she stands transfixed at the sight of her mother’s naked body in a bathroom mirror reflecting their doubled selves. When Beli asks her to stop staring and examine a lump “as secretive as a plot” in her breast (53), she tears herself away from the mirror to explore the tumour that will further disfigure her mother’s scarred body. Comparing herself to Helen Keller as she closes her eyes to feel the growth, Lola is overcome by a feeling that her life is about to change. Born with “bruja ways,” she becomes aware of her potentiality as she begins to empathize with her mother rather than merely observe the symptoms of her pain: “I feel it too . . . Lo siento,” she says of the lump (53). Evoking various possible translations of the verbs ‘to feel’ and ‘sentir’, she transforms the clinical bathroom scene into one of compassion where “it all begins. Where you begin” (54; italics in original). Thus, her sympathetic exchange with her mother in a site of cleansing makes her receptive to a message that “toll[ed] like a bell: change, change, change” (58); and the use of the second person singular invites the reader, whether of the ‘first’, ‘second’, or ‘third’ world, to
participate in addressing the injustices of hegemony.

Lola’s encounter with caritas in the bathroom prefigures her participation in the later unraveling of her mother’s identity and a deeper understanding of her dysfunctional family. When La Inca is about to return to the past and break her silence regarding Beli’s traumatic youth, Lola senses the import of the occasion: “My abuela was sitting there, forlorn, trying to cobble together the right words and I could not move or breathe. I felt like I always did at the last seconds of a race, when I was sure I was going to explode. She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin” (75). Through La Inca, Lola learns of a chapter of Beli’s life that “got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul” (258). As her grandmother uncovers the family’s past, Lola realizes that her tyrannical mother is also a victim of the unspeakable violence endemic to patriarchy and experiences a transformation.

From her positioning at the interstices of the Dominican diaspora, and armed with the knowledge of narratives that problematize official versions of history, Lola is able to exercise her potentiality to subvert dominant discourse. Unlike her mother, “one of those Oyá-souls, always turning allergic to tranquilidad” (79), whose spiritual malaise occasions the desire to “escape her own despised black skin” (80), Lola becomes aware that escape from oneself, that is, from the past, is impossible.45 Only the recognition of past and present wrongs can bring about change, for “you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in” (209). In this way, through Lola’s voice in first person and second person singular, Díaz advocates reinscribing the past with

45 Oyá is an Orisha, a Yoruba deity associated with storms, destruction and chaos who guards the underworld. The force of change, she is a symbol of transition from life to death and renewal. Her alternate name is Oya-ajere or "Carrier of the Container of Fire" (Yoruba Traditions).
inclusive narratives as the only possibility for agency in diasporic communities. Moreover, he suggests the conflation of time necessary for these narratives to emerge only requires an imaginative overstepping of the boundaries of fact and fiction. As Walter Benjamin affirms, the mourning of the past is “a creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empaths” (Illuminations 1). Here temporal and spatial boundaries collapse so that complementarity supplants causality for transformation in kairological time. Thus, Lola insists healing comes not with flight but by engaging with the dissonant narratives of the Caribbean diaspora, informing the reader “that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (209).

The ease with which Lola crosses borders to perceive the voices of those occluded by history offers Díaz’s audience an example of the way in which the contemporary transforms potentiality into actuality. That is, her liminality becomes Bhabha’s ‘Third Space of enunciation’ allowing her to forge relationships with others across imagined boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, and sexuality. These relationships are founded on a singular ability to feel compassion for others, whether for her tyrannical mother, her ostracized brother, her sexist boyfriend, or the marginalized she protects on and off the university campus. Unlike Beli, Oscar, and Yunior for whom relationships are problematic, she engages positively with the diverse voices of the subjugated while engaged in the daily struggle against multiple discourses of oppression. As she negotiates cultural contact zones, she becomes the personification of the non-linear text in which an ethics of simultaneity rather than narrative subjectivity offers the

46 The name Lola is an abbreviation of Dolores from the Latin dolor or sorrow, in turn derived from the proto Indo-European root delh, to cut in order to shape, connoting suffering and growth. In Sanskrit, the word lola denotes movement to and fro, changeability, and longing. In addition, in North American urban slang Lola can suggest transgenderism, hence Lola’s chest is “as flat as a board” (52); however, it is used more commonly to describe a woman of great beauty. Finally, a beautiful black woman with East Indian features and great physical strength, Lola shares the name of the Indian goddess Lakshmi, goddess of light, beauty, and good fortune.
reader a non-representational image of community founded on humanity.

As Agamben affirms in *The Time That Remains*, through love as *agape* and *caritas*, human beings do not experience others as identifiable subjectivities fixed by language. On the contrary, the properties of “lovable” *whatever singularities* are significant in that they constitute being as a process characterized by mutability (*CC 1*). That is, language does not name others but brings *whatever singularity* as being in communication to life so that without communication there is no being. As love seeks communicability “it conditions precisely the possibility of knowledge and truth,” and is fundamental in the realization of potentiality (*PO 186*). This ‘knowledge’, however, is the awareness of an irreducible other rather than the apprehension of a static subjectivity. For Agamben, love is “to live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote” (*IP 61*). In other words, it is an unknowable difference that allows the *whatever being* to communicate its communicability rather than a fixed personal identity. Whatever being “is that being such that it always matters” precisely because it is lovable as an existence in an irreparable relation to others (*CC 1*). Thus, Agamben views potentiality as dependent on the contingency of the world, just as Benítez-Rojo and Glissant see the inherent complementarity of life in the Caribbean as fundamental to the transformation of day-to-day experience.

For Díaz complementarity in the Dominican diaspora precludes the notion that a sense of belonging arises from the desire for exclusive citizenship in an imagined nation state. In *Oscar Wao*, the characters occupy multiple temporal and physical positions so that identity becomes a contingent process that is neither essentialized nor universalized. As a non-linear text that exposes narratives eclipsed by the teleology of history, Díaz’s novel presents individuals who reconcile border crossing with belonging. As Díaz insists when asked about his sense of place in
an interview for *The Chicago Tribune*, the key attributes of belonging in the Dominican diaspora are paradox and flux:

I have a very powerful sense of place, but I have a very powerful sense of being a migrant, so it's both. It seems like I'm always leaving my home. That's part of the formula. I love the Dominican Republic. I go back all the time. I love New Jersey. Go back all the time. But ... when I close my eyes and see home, it's both the Dominican Republic and New York City. (“Long-term”)

Like Oscar who asks Ybón why he can’t have two homes, Díaz problematizes the notion that belonging involves fast ties to a nation state founded on exclusivity (318). National borders do not represent an identifiable homogenous community; rather, they impose a false unity so that difference is subsumed under the banner of a universal identity. However, the rhetoric of progress fails to silence the dissonance of the Caribbean as individuals engage in a process of transculturation that promotes intra and international affinities. As conflictive as convivial, these relationships make possible the transcendence of sociocultural and political boundaries so that compassion rather than othering fosters solidarity. At the end of the novel, Yunior describes Oscar’s last letter in which he claims that he has fulfilled his quest for love and discovered that inclusivity is “the cure to what ails us”: “He wrote that he couldn’t believe he’d had to wait for this so goddam long. (Ybón was the one who suggested calling the wait something else. Yeah, like what? Maybe she said, you could call it life.)” (335). Thus, in the final chapters Yunior speaks of the affection he has for his wife and Lola who he perceives as mutable singularities rather than the objects of lust he pursued as a younger man determined to meet the standards of Dominican maleness.

The interaction between Yunior and Lola at the end of *Oscar Wao* points to Yunior’s
awareness that love paradoxically brings the Other closer while revealing being as irreducible. Therefore, accepting that possessing another is the antithesis of what he desires, he can nurture a positive relationship with Lola and declare himself in Che Guevara’s terms “a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (326). This more meaningful bond grows to include her daughter whose transcultural singularity undermines traditional collective identity constructs based on national history. Both Dominican and American, and further culturally contaminated by a Cuban father, she becomes the embodiment of an alternative concept of collectivity that approaches Agamben’s concept of the ‘coming community’. When Yunior and Lola meet, they take turns saying her daughter’s name, also the name of the Egyptian mother goddess, Isis, the patroness of nature and magic. Born of the lotus flower, symbol of rebirth, Isis is the protector of both the downtrodden and the powerful. Therefore, with a name evoking both ambiguity and regeneration, Lola’s daughter is “neither Captain Marvel, nor Billy Batson [his alter ego], but the lightening” (329). That is, she is neither superheroine nor mortal but the actuality of her mother’s potentiality. Wearing a necklace of three azabaches symbolizing protection, healing, and spiritual awakening that once belonged to La Inca, Beli, Oscar and Lola, she is protected by generations of powerful elder magic. Her syncretic identity shields her against the fukú curse until, Yunior hopes, she is “smart and brave” enough to “put an end to it,” transforming the “inextinguishable longing for elsewheres” into a healing yearning for the beloved other (330-331).
CONCLUSION

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz presents the marginalized Others of the Dominican diaspora as individuals whose longing for a sense of community transcends the notion of bounded physical and temporal loci. His characters are never only of one nation or one culture, neither can they be identified as representing a singular race, class, religion, gender, or sexuality. Rather, they occupy multiple realities across contingent temporal registers so that errancy, mutability, and ambivalence characterize their transcultural experience of the quotidian. Paradoxically, this being in flux opens liminal spaces from which they can grasp potentiality to refigure the past and interrupt the performance of the present.

Forced by physical and psychic displacement to negotiate the interstices of the Caribbean ‘chaos monde’, Díaz’s protagonists imagine a commonality that transcends traditional paradigms of belonging. Like Derek Walcott’s Shabine, who laments “either I’m nobody or I’m a nation,” they eschew the notion that a viable sense of self can emerge from the antinomy between the particular and the universal. That is, rejecting state-sanctioned means of conceiving affiliations based on essence, consanguinity, or pre-colonial history, they experience kinships born of present exigency irrespective of imposed boundaries. For Díaz and Agamben, the violence perpetuated by hegemonic discourses guarantees the marginalization of individuals whose very existence as homo sacri remains negotiable. Only a reinterpretation of community can reconcile the individual’s *zoe* and *bios* so that being matters because it *takes place* within an inclusive commonality, not because it is placed within an exclusivity. Thus, answering Oswald de Andrade’s call for cultural anthropophagy as transformative praxis, Díaz’s text affirms the complementarity of Benítez-Rojo’s Plantation discourse to narrate community as a fraught but generative process that precludes any attempt to essentialize individuals and their communities.
Although Díaz and Agamben reject the notion that bounded collectivities of fixed identities constitute viable communities, they do not advocate the erasure of difference. Just as a community of ‘whatever singularities’ does not constitute an affiliation of individuals valued for their particular qualities, neither does it realize an insipid universality. Due to their open subjectivity, Díaz’s characters realize being as neither singular nor universal. Indeed, their constant crossing of socio-cultural and political borders subverts any effort to identify them as seamless subjectivities within homogenized communities. As Agamben insists, ‘whatever singularity’, or “The Lovable,” ensures that difference is not subsumed under the arbitrary labeling of a collectivity, for community is not mediated by the conditions of belonging but by belonging itself (CC 2). Whether one is “brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional” (ME 53), or “Communist, French, or Muslim” (CC 1), one belongs because one’s singularity is taking place in connection with others. In other words, human relationships are not founded on the intelligence of an essence, or of properties that identify individuals as belonging to a particular group, but of her or his intelligibility. In this way, in the coming community the ineffability of Walcott’s Shabine is no longer juxtaposed against the nation state, for his singularity as such is exposed as being “whatever you want, that is, lovable” (CC 2). For Díaz and Agamben, then, the dissonance of syncretic communities allows the contemporary to transcend essence and grasp potentiality to transform human experience in kairological time. In the imagined community of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the ‘whatever singularities’ of the Dominican diaspora experience a union that also keeps them apart. In their search for self-actualization, their being in common is founded on their exposure to other similarly engaged singularities so that belonging becomes the desire to communicate the self. Thus, they are not moving toward another thing or
place but towards a taking place with others, or in Oscar Wao’s words, towards “the Cosmo DNA, the cure to what ails us” (333).
Bibliography


