

Department of English
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Senior Thesis

Pretending that the Scribble was Letters, Words, Names:
Blankness as a Mode of Storytelling in
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Sophia Abraham-Raveson

Advisor: Rajeswari Mohan
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In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, blank space stands out. This Junot Díaz novel is a maximalist text that incorporates centuries of Dominican and world history in order to tell the De Leons' stories through many generations, including footnotes jam-packed with extra information and referencing historical documents; in trying to fill in every possible gap in the story, the novel incidentally draws attention to the blanks and silences. As *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* positions itself as responding to the silencing nature of dictators and the ways in which master historical narratives erase marginalized voices, the desire to write a full and complete story, without silences or missing pieces, makes sense. Still, there are moments of blank spaces and silences within the text; these moments can feel unsettling, anxiety inducing, or even dangerous. However, even as there is a potential threat in blankness, the blanks within the novel serve a variety of essential functions. Understanding *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a maximalist text that asks readers to hold many pieces and forms of story and storytelling at once, the value of blankness as an essential element of communicating story becomes clear. As the novel presents the "end of language" in connection to colonial violence and the moments where (written) language fails to communicate, it simultaneously creates a new hybrid form of language that makes room for multiple forms of storytelling and communicating. In this way, the blanks and silences in the novel cannot be merely understood as an absence of language, but as forms of language themselves. In employing blanks not as a failure of language but as the creation of new ways of communicating, the novel asks readers to accept multiple modes of telling stories, even when these stories are, at times, illegible to the reader. Although the novel sometimes presents the inability to fully communicate experiences as terrifying and anxiety producing (expressed through the maximalism, the multiple endings, the desire to tell

everything ever), it also asserts that history doesn't need to be legible to everyone (especially white colonial audiences) in order to be valid.

Especially when talking about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the ways in which, as an alternative historical narrative, it asks readers to simultaneously accept multiple seemingly conflicting truths and realities, it feels important to incorporate this framework of multiplicity into the methodology of my essay. Critic Sandra Cox writes of the novel: "Because of the fictive repudiation, not only of official historical narratives, but of narrative's power to produce a singular truth, readers are encouraged by the narrative strategies not to reject or suppress particular narratives" (117). Cox argues that readers of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* must learn to accept multiple narrative truths and hold them simultaneously. As such, I want to be mindful that every moment in the book does many things, and I don't want to simply choose the single reading that proves my argument. In this project of "reading" the blank pages and blank spaces of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I want to account for the many possibilities imbedded in these blanks, as well as all that I cannot know. Rather than perpetuating the silencing of some of the blank spaces, I hope to bring these blanks into the space of analyzable pieces of narrative, without attempting to displace them from their original forms. As part of the importance of these blank spaces is their illegibility, I have to be comfortable with not always fully understanding, even as I attempt to read and analyze these blank spaces. I want to recognize the many truths of this novel and not only my interpretation of those truths. As this holding of multiple truths and realities serves an anticolonial purpose, resisting dictatorially controlled master narratives, I want to honor that in the way I choose to analyze the novel.

When I talk about blankness, I am primarily referring to the páginas en blanco/blank pages and the physical blank lines in the text (____ ____ ____). Secondly, I am looking at blank

faces/the man with no face, namelessness, and silences. In order to understand the importance of blankness, it is essential to examine maximalism within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and the ways in which blankness poses a threat to the maximalist aesthetic. Stefan Ercolino defines the maximalist novel as “an aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel [that] first appeared in the United States during the last quarter of the twentieth century...it is called ‘maximalist’ due to the multiform maximizing and hypertrophic tension of its narrative” (241)¹. Ercolino’s definitions of the genre are helpful in glossing the concept of maximalist literature, but don’t address the specificity of Díaz’s maximalist aesthetic. Díaz’s maximalism writes into the silences imposed by dictatorship, filling up space with story. The maximalism presents itself to be largely in response to the silencing power of dictatorship; to counter the blank spaces and silences in history, the maximalist novel aims to tell as much as possible. In the context of a history of Dominican people’s stories dying along with them, telling every story, historical and personal, gains a sense of urgency. Maximalism, as a literary tradition, is a storytelling method and aesthetic that utilizes excess to fill the pages with stories, information, and languages. This text fills over 300 pages with English, Dominican Spanish, English and Spanish slang, endless references ranging from sci-fi and comics to Toni Morrison literature, footnotes filled with historical details, and multiple endings—the amount and variety of languages and references establish this text as one that likely couldn’t be fully understandable to any reader besides Díaz. In this essay, I aim to look at how the maximalist aesthetic of the novel causes the blank spaces to hold more narrative importance; in a project of attempting to tell every story to resist the

¹ Ercolino lists ten elements that define the maximalist novel: length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, inter-semiocity, ethical commitment, and hybrid realism (242). These elements are helpful in thinking about the ways in which *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a maximalist novel, as well as the ways in which the novel departs from Ercolino’s definitions.

silencing of dictatorship, stories that don't get told (or don't get communicated in a legible form) hold more weight. Then, I will explore the function of language in the novel, understanding the ways in which it seems to end/fail, and then requires the creation of new forms of language and storytelling; these new hybrid forms include blank pages/blank spaces. I will then look closely at the *páginas en blanco*² and blank lines in the novel, understanding how they aren't an absence of language but a marker of language and story that exists but resists being written down. In doing so, I will also highlight the value of illegibility when communicating difficult stories to a mainstream audience. Then I will look at the figure of the man with no face in the novel, and how he acts in contrast to the blank pages and blank lines. Rather than being empowering as a new form of communication, his form of blankness points to the danger of having no identity or no name. Finally, I will conclude by looking at what Díaz has said about silence and blankness in the novel, and understanding the wide variety of things the blank spaces in the novel are doing.

In the context of maximalism, blankness becomes more obvious and more anxiety-ridden. When the novel posits itself as trying to tell every element of the story, everything that is not included holds much more weight. Yuniór's position as narrator/story collector, as well as writer, is important in noting what gets left out from the story. Monica Hanna, in her essay *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cannibal*, examines Yuniór's role as tied to the power of dictatorship and the desire to control other people's narratives. She describes Yuniór as consuming everyone else's stories and then spitting back out only what he chooses in order to construct the overall narrative; in this process, Yuniór never shares Oscar's own writing (Hanna

² I do not italicize any Spanish words in this essay because Díaz intentionally does not italicize any non-English words in the novel.

94). Although Yuniór appears to be telling every element of story he manages to collect, the absence of Oscar's writing in the text, even though we know Yuniór has access to it, makes it necessary to question what else is missing from the text. The blanks function in a similar way—in a context of telling all, the things that are not clearly told hold significance, as they must have been actively and intentionally left out of the written narrative. When it becomes clear that there are missing elements in the story, it's useful to question whether these are gaps in knowledge/story or gaps in language. Is Yuniór intentionally keeping stories hidden from the reader, or does he simply not have the linguistic tools to make the story legible to the reader?

The maximalist aesthetic involves a piecing together of fragmented stories and layering them on top of each other—although we are receiving a lot of information, this layering of fragments also makes visible what we don't know and can't make sense of. As the narrator, Yuniór is constantly telling different stories and pieces of narrative that he seems to have gathered from a variety of sources. In the section about The Gangster's wife, Trujillo's sister, Yuniór writes,

There are those alive who claim that La Fea had actually been a pro herself in the time before the rise of her brother, but that seems to be more calumny than anything, like saying that Balaguer fathered a dozen illegitimate children and then used the pueblo's money to hush it up—wait, that's true, but probably not the other—shit, who can keep track of what's true and what's false in a country as baká as ours (139).

This process of taking stories from different sources and trying to make sense of them when brought together makes visible the constant self-editing, as well as the gaps in the story. In drawing attention to the sources of story, Yuniór employs the maximalist aesthetic while also making clear what isn't or can't be known for certain. As compared to maximalism, *The Brief*

Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao portrays minimalism as dangerous. When Oscar leaves for the Dominican Republic, Yunior writes, “Was trying to decide what he would take with him. Was allowing himself only ten of his books, the core of his canon (his words), was trying to pare it all down to what was necessary. Only what I can carry. It seemed like an odd Oscar thing, until later we would realize it wasn’t” (312). This moment highlights the foreboding nature of minimalism, and the ways in which the novel values excess writing and text. Even the sentence style here describing Oscar’s minimalism is minimalist, as Yunior utilizes sentence fragments and short punctuated sentences. While at first the minimalism only seems odd to Yunior, and out of place in this maximalist text, it soon becomes clear that it’s anticipating something dangerous. This serves as a helpful metaphor for the role of maximalism in the novel: it’s not only an aesthetic choice to contrast minimalism, but also a tactic for resisting the dangers and violence of silencing stories. This moment draws attention to the aspects of minimalism, gaps, and blankness present in this maximalist text. Although maximalism provides excess information and story, it also makes everything that’s missing extra visible. In this way, the blanks in the novel necessitate closer examination.

The maximalist aesthetic of the novel demonstrates that communicating and telling as much as possible is a mode of resistance to the violent silencing of dictatorship. Therefore, when the novel presents the idea of “the end of language” and moments where it appears that language fails to communicate, it links failure to communicate with dictatorial violence. Beli’s beating on page 147 provides an understanding of how language connects to violence. Yunior begins by saying, “How she survived I’ll never know,” (147) illustrating that although he knows the details of the beating and exactly what parts of her body were hurt, there are limits to what he knows. Again, there is an important difference between gaps in knowledge and gaps in language: here,

he can explain almost exactly what happened, and yet he cannot “know.” He then says of the beating, “All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope” (147). This phrase, “end of language,” is striking, as we are only able to read it because of the existence of language. This inherent contradiction asks readers to think more critically about what it means for language to end, and how that happens in this novel. One way to understand this “end of language” is that it was the end of Beli being able to tell her stories and experiences; after such a traumatic and painful experience, part of Beli shuts down, and she doesn’t tell her kids (or anyone else as far as we know) about her experiences. Still, the fact that the story of this beating is recounted with clear written language (albeit with gaps) asks what kind of language or what use of language has ended. Even as this violent act was the end of a particular language, there is possibility for a new one to be created to take its place and try to piece together the story.

Oscar experiences a very similar beating later in the novel, but his beating is not considered the end of language. This could be because his beating happens chronologically after Beli’s (meaning “the end of language” would have already happened), but it could also be because Beli’s beating was “before diaspora,” as the narrator continually writes. Diaspora marks Beli’s movement from the Dominican Republic to the U.S., and her connection to other Dominican people outside of the physical space of the island. Although she is able to return to the Dominican Republic, this shift into diaspora marks some kind of inability to fully return to her life in the Dominican Republic. Therefore, as language ends, diaspora begins: in order to integrate into “diaspora,” Beli must sacrifice some form of language, giving up her most natural or intuitive way of communicating. Oscar, on the other hand, never knows this way of being “before diaspora” and before the “end of language”; as such, his encounter with state violence marks a return rather than an end. In this way, the end of language is tied to the loneliness of

diaspora; this leads to generations of miscommunications, changing languages (likely shifting from Spanish to English), and stories that can't be told or understood.

As Yuniors presents it, language seems to be both a violent and an anticolonial force. Talking of the beating, Yuniors says, "even into the first stanzas of that wilding," (147), likening the beating to poetry. In this way, language is portrayed as violent; "wilding" takes the place of the word "poem," suggesting that as language ends, violence replaces poetry and the beauty of language. Yuniors goes on to say that Beli began to experience "a loneliness so total it was beyond death, a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she'd not even had her own name" (148). Memory is key to telling stories, and as this loneliness obliterated all memory, it makes storytelling (and thus, a certain use of language) impossible. Additionally, the loneliness of not having a name ties language to the process of self-identification. Having a name is essential to having an identity, and the lack of name and ability to self-identify is particular to the violence of colonialism. Yuniors then writes, "And it was into that loneliness that she was sliding, and it was here that she would dwell forever, alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick pretending that the scribble was letters, words, names" (148). Loneliness is depicted as the inability to form language that can be communicated from one person to another. Not being able to form words or names then becomes terrifying, preventing the necessary and healing act of telling stories. The fact that this scratching illegibly in the ground is a continuous state where "she would dwell forever" highlights the importance of storytelling and language in grounding the self in time. When Oscar experiences a similar violent beating years later, Yuniors writes, "Where did they take him? Where else. The canefields./ How's that for eternal return?" (296). Instead of the "end of language," Oscar experiences "eternal return"; in this way, it becomes clear that without any form of language and

telling story, there are no ends, only circular returns. Still, even as Oscar doesn't get to tell his own story and communicate his experiences, Yuniór is able to narrate his story through the form of this novel. Yuniór knows details of Oscar's experiences that Oscar could never have told him, but still he narrates, utilizing question marks ("Where did they take him?" and "How's that for eternal return?") to highlight that he might not be able to speak with full authority on every detail of Oscar's experiences, but he can still attempt to communicate them through written language. Thus, even in this experience of "eternal return" for Oscar, Yuniór's narration of the events attempts to disrupt the circularity. Yuniór goes on to say, "If they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it" (301). To move forward to something new, maybe even something better, language is necessary.

Even as this beating is described as the end of language and the end of hope, the beating is not the end. When the beating is over, Yuniór writes, "Pain everywhere but alive. Alive" (148). The repetition of the word "alive" gets at the ways in which language can't have fully "ended" after Beli's experience; simply saying the same word twice highlights the importance of the word, and of using language to name experiences. Importantly, in this novel, the idea of "the end" can't be taken at its word. The novel ends over and over again, with chapters called "The Final Voyage," "The Last Days of Oscar Wao," "The End of the Story," and sub-chapters called, "On a Super Final Note" and "The Final Letter," all in succession within the last 19 pages of the book. It is then important to rethink what might be meant by "the end of language"; it's definitely an end of something, but not a complete end. This story is still told, and language is perhaps overused in this long, hybrid, maximalist text. Instead of knowing exactly what has ended and how, it is helpful to explore where language is enough and where it fails, where new language has to be invented, and what stories survive. At the "end" of the book, Yuniór writes

of Lola's daughter, Isis, saying "And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream" (330-331). Here, "an end" is a dream that is nearly impossible to reach, one that will allow for an attempt to heal from violence rather than repeating it over and over again. This is in contrast to the violence of the idea of "the end of language." Still, it becomes clear that some form of language and storytelling is necessary to move out of the circular patterns of colonial violence and personal and familial pain. At this same part in the novel, Yunior quotes a comic panel that Oscar has circled, that reads: "Veidt says: 'I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.' And Manhattan, before fading from the Universe, replies: 'In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends'" (331). Thus, even as there is possibility for new forms of language and storytelling that disrupt violence, this possibility isn't definite or secure. Language is not a solution to colonial violence, but a tool to at least work toward new forms of resistant storytelling.

While certain forms of language and storytelling might become impossible, new hybrid forms of language and storytelling must be created to tell the stories that have been previously silenced. These hybrid languages incorporate a variety of storytelling strategies, including silences and blank spaces. We see the multiplicity of language depicted in this novel through the English, Dominican Spanish and slang³, sci-fi references, Dominican history, and blank spaces (not an all-encompassing list), as well as through historical documents and various narrative

³ In her essay *Now Check It: Junot Díaz's Wondrous Spanglish*, Glenda R. Carpio highlights the multi-vocality of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, explaining, for example, how "Díaz...highlight[s] the specific qualities of Dominican Spanish and the distinctiveness of African American slang in order to create a sense of linguistic communities and inclusiveness. His privileged audience are those who recognize the 'blunt, irreverent cant of the pueblo,' coming both from the Dominican Republic and '142nd and Broadway'" (273).

sources. Even as Yunior's voice is the primary one readers hear, especially as he doesn't use quotation marks or include Oscar's writing⁴, there are important moments where he brings in other voices. For example, Lola has her own section narrated by herself (51), and there is a section entitled "Ybón, as Recorded by Oscar" (289). This multi-vocal strategy allows Yunior to avoid replicating the dictatorship model of telling history from only one perspective (Harford Vargas). The novel then utilizes multi-vocality along with other hybrid storytelling methods, as "[Díaz] also underscores the importance of writing history in new ways with new—or newly combined—forms capable of including experiences usually unexplored in traditional history, all while insisting on the impossibility of telling the whole story" (Hanna *Reassembling the Fragments* 516). This multi-vocality is an element of Díaz's hybridity that he utilizes as a resistance strategy against dictatorship and its attempts to control narratives.

Utilizing hybridity, the novel incorporates elements of both written and oral modes and traditions of storytelling. Monica Hanna outlines the importance of hybridity in post-colonial Caribbean literature, as she references Derek Walcott's "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," and then writes, "These images of fragmentation, reassembly, and restoration are particularly useful in describing the literary and historical reconstructions of Dominican history offered by Junot Díaz's 2007 novel" (Hanna *Reassembling the Fragments* 498). She then goes on to write, "The novel adopts a hybrid narrative model which... self-consciously engages with Caribbean literary and historical discourses, with a heavy emphasis on Afro-Caribbean literary tradition, while also adopting narrative structures and references particular to United States literature and popular culture in a language that crackles with vibrancy" (Hanna 498-9). Hanna

⁴ Hanna, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cannibal*, highlights how Yunior often avoids allowing other people to speak in the narrative, and how he never shows the reader Oscar's writing even though we know he has access to it.

helpfully positions this novel in relation to hybridity and articulates the anticolonial purposes of hybridity. Hybridity and maximalism are very intertwined, as the many different traditions, languages, and aesthetics that establish hybridity in the novel also contribute to the maximalism of the novel. The genre of the novel could be understood as a hybrid between fiction and the Latin American tradition of testimonio, among other things. John Beverly's theories of testimonio outline a methodology of collecting personal narratives that relate to testifying, truth telling, and bearing witness. It typically involves someone of a marginalized identity who has experienced violence of some kind orally telling their story to someone who is then able to write it into literature. In this way, it combines oral story-telling traditions with literary writing traditions to create a unique form of literature.

Although fiction doesn't fit into Beverly's understanding of testimonio, there are elements of Yuniors project and methodology that draw on testimonio, utilizing oral methods of collecting narratives and putting them into writing. The novel also plays with the difference between telling and writing stories. While telling stories seems to be a positive, resistant act, writing is depicted as more complex and vexed. In footnote 11, Díaz writes, "What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef...Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*" (97). Even as writing seems to provide a mode of producing counter-histories and challenging the power of dictatorship, this footnote highlights how writing can also be authoritative. More so than oral storytelling, written language, in its finality and permanence, carries a potentially controlling authority. Hanna describes how this passage highlights the ways in which Yuniors writing and narration, at times, replicates the

controlling nature of dictatorship he claims to write against. Even as this novel is created with writing, and its maximalist aesthetic utilizes as much writing as possible, it recognizes that writing is not an unproblematic act.

Analyzing this same footnote, Harford Vargas argues, Establishing a similitude between writers and dictators, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* grapples with how to circumnavigate *authoritarianism*—that is, the precarious link between authorship, authority, and authoritarianism...As the primary narrator and storyteller, Yunior loosely functions as a dictator in both senses because he controls and orders representation and because he collects, writes down, and reshapes a plethora of oral stories that have been recounted to him (202).

This examination of the role of writing in connection to dictatorship and oral story collection is helpful in understanding the complexity and anxiety of storytelling and writing in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Although oral stories have weight in this novel, (almost) everything communicated to the reader is done through written story. In this way, the novel gets at the ways in which history gets told and validated; typically, written historical narratives are considered to carry more weight and truth than oral narratives. Harford Vargas further analyzes the formal elements of the novel, contending,

The single-spaced footnotes and double-spaced main text also cause the novel's structure to resemble that of an academic book. In traditional academic usage, footnotes establish authority, acting as the supportive and evidentiary structure. Yunior draws on the epistemic weight granted footnotes in scholarly convention to insert multiple kinds of sources into his fictional footnotes (217).

In combining written history, rumor, science fiction, comic books, etc., the novel breaks down the hierarchy of modes of storytelling. The footnotes that include slang and curse words especially highlight this, as Harford Vargas points out. In this way, even as the novel seems to sometimes privilege written storytelling over oral, it also deconstructs the authority of writing (especially of historical and academic writing), making space for alternative hybrid modes of storytelling even as it utilizes writing.

Díaz utilizes blank spaces in this written text as alternative modes of storytelling, allowing the absence of text to hold narrative space. The novel illustrates that blankness/silence can be both terrifying and violent as well as a space of possibility; further, it can be a space of reclaiming stories—the stories don't have to be told out loud or written down in order to exist. This idea challenges the notion that stories only matter if they're heard/read by an audience; instead, stories can have inherent value just by being experienced/known/recognized. Many critics have examined the meaning of blank space in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, focusing mostly on the páginas en blanco. Although the critics' understandings vary, they have mostly viewed these blank pages as representational or symbolic of an element of dictatorship. Lauren Grantz sums up critiques about the páginas en blanco:

Scholarly perception of the páginas and Yunió's treatment of them has tended to fall into two distinct camps. The first acknowledges that while the páginas can never really be 'filled in,' Yunió's attempts to address them (either by imagining their potential content or acknowledging their existence) are imperfect but necessary means of narrativizing traumatic experiences, challenging official histories, and promoting healing. Members of the second scholarly camp emphasize that while the páginas en blanco might be generative, they are also symptomatic of Yunió's tendency to silence or

manipulate information contradicting the story he wants to tell—a tendency he shares with the dictatorship (129).

Grantz agrees with the latter group, claiming that the term *página en blanco* is a term derived from the violent silencing of dictatorship and then coopted by Yuniór throughout the novel. Grantz, then, views Yuniór as a problematic character who maybe shouldn't be telling these stories at all, or at least not in this manner. Yuniór, in telling other people's stories, doesn't always clearly have their consent to share and often promotes his own voice and language over those of the De Leons'. This is important to recognize, and also I don't think it is helpful to view the blanks as simply representational of dictatorship. Yuniór depicts the ways in which dictatorships/Trujillo have silenced writers and erased much of history, and still in other moments is able to reclaim blank pages/silences as empowering. Pamela J. Rader also analyzes the *páginas en blanco*, asserting, "The black ink printed on the novel's white pages counters unwritten, missing, silenced, and destroyed accounts and testifies to the desire for self-articulation. The *página en blanco* reminds us of all we do not know and marks the unwritten potential of the human imagination" (2). All of these analyses are helpful, and yet none fully encompasses the work that the blank space is doing. Holding the valuable arguments that these critics are making, I want to see how we can understand these blanks as more than just representational. As the novel asserts the need to establish new forms of language and storytelling to resist the limited narrative space of dictatorship, blank spaces become stories themselves.

Looking at the blank spaces in the novel, it's important to look at the different types of blank space (*páginas en blanco*, the man with no face, blank lines), as they all function differently in bringing blankness into narrative space. The *páginas en blanco*, as specifically

blank pages (not simply blank spaces), emphasize a lack of written language, or something missing from a book. As such, they point to writing as an essential mode of communicating truth and story. At times, the *página en blanco* seems to hold the violent silencing of dictatorship, in contrast to the maximalist pages of Díaz's book. A footnote about Balaguer reads,

Joaquin Balaguer was a...killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death...Balaguer died in 2002. The *página* is still blanca (90).

Here, the *página en blanco* marks the power of dictatorship to rewrite, or erase, violent histories. Even as Balaguer murders writers who write against dictatorship, he uses writing (and not writing) to further the authoritative power of dictatorship. In this moment, the *página en blanco* holds violence. However, even as the Trujillato uses *páginas en blanco* to uphold their violence, Yunió demonstrates how *páginas en blanco* can be used for alternative narrative purposes. Later, when trying to piece together what happened to Abelard, Yunió writes,

What is certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn't leave a paper trail—they didn't share their German contemporaries' lust for documentation. And it's not like the *fukú* itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrales ain't much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard's imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there and nothing more (243).

In this passage, Yuniór links “silence” to a lack of written record in a way that demonstrates that this lack of writing, in some ways, strengthened the power and violence of Trujillo.

Interestingly, though, it’s not only Trujillo who doesn’t leave a written record—the Cabrala neither wrote nor spoke their stories. Even as this lack of writing poses a challenge to Yuniór and the reader as we try to make sense of what happened, the idea of “a silence that stands monument to the generations” is a powerful one that seems to present silence as a powerful tool. This silence isn’t a lack of speech, but a monument—understanding a monument as an obvious marker of the silence’s existence, it becomes possible to read this as the Cabrala choosing to mark their stories with silence rather than with spoken or written narrative. In this way, the Cabrala are able to exercise agency over whether (and how) their stories get told. Thus, even as the *páginas en blanco* demonstrate the violent silencing of dictatorship, they (as well as silences) can also allow for narrative agency.

The *página en blanco* sometimes seems to represent the existence of stories that are too painful to be told or written; still, they have narrative importance, and the blank page (even in its silence) marks their existence rather than erasing them. Recounting part of Belí’s story, Yuniór says, “Before 1951, our orphaned girl had lived with another foster family, monstrous people if the rumors are to be believed, a dark period of her life neither she nor her madre ever referenced. Their very own *página en blanco*” (78). The use of “our” and “their” mark Belí’s personal story as a shared history. Although Belí was the only one experiencing the harm in this *página en blanco*, Yuniór and La Inca, as well as a collective implied by “our,” take on the truth of the blank page as their own, as Yuniór writes “their very own *página en blanco*” as opposed to “her very own *página en blanco*.” As this *página en blanco* represents a truth that is too painful to tell, instead of writing it down to establish it as “history,” the story gets taken on collectively as

one to carry but not share. This challenges Rader's idea that the blank pages are places of imagination—here, the blank page is a place of choosing not to tell, or not being able to tell. Still, even if the details of this *página en blanco* are never told, the novel still chronicles its existence, illustrating that although blank spaces can be dangerous and threatening, the novel can reclaim these blank pages by establishing even what cannot be written as history and story. Lauren Grantz claims that the term *página en blanco* is a term derived from the violent silencing of dictatorship and then coopted by Yuniór throughout the novel. Clearly the term is derived from the violent silencing of dictatorship, and even as Yuniór might be coopting it, he is also reclaiming it. Although Yuniór does not quote Beli's own language about her childhood, calling her traumatic childhood a *página en blanco* could be empowering for her rather than silencing—if Beli didn't want to talk about it, why should Yuniór try to tell it? He accepts her silence on this topic (even if he is a complex narrator figure and it's important to acknowledge the dangers of him having full control over telling other people's stories).

In other moments, the blank page seems simultaneously threatening to the imaginative act of writing and validating of the existence of stories that can't be/aren't written down. When Oscar is recovering from being beaten, he dreams about a man holding a book and "The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he noticed that the book was blank. The book is blank. Those were the words La Inca's servant heard him say just before he broke through the plane of unconsciousness and into the universe of the Real" (302). In the dream context, blankness is confusing and haunting, and something that is just out of reach. Additionally, moving from realizing "the book was blank" to saying out loud "the book is blank" is a way of taking one's knowledge of the past and asserting into the present and future with language. Because Oscar is a writer and always writing pages and pages of his novels, the idea

of a blank book again seems threatening—it challenges his main mode of communication.

However, accepting that the book is blank in the “universe of the Real” validates blank pages, and the stories that aren’t written, as a way of telling history.

Although *páginas en blanco* gesture to empty pages and not silences, Díaz describes the *páginas* as possessing the ability to speak—in this way, the blank pages are depicted not as an emptiness but as stories that haven’t been told out loud yet. Yuniór narrates, “Due partially to Beli’s silence on the matter and other folks’ lingering unease when it comes to talking about the regime, info on the Gangster is fragmented; I’ll give you what I’ve managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en blanco* finally speak” (119). Here, Yuniór explicitly acknowledges the fragmented and gap-filled information along with the sources of the stories he’s telling. As such, Yuniór frames the stories as existing but hard to put together as someone who didn’t directly experience them. Yuniór’s positioning in this passage (and at many points throughout the book) helps shape the understanding that so many stories exist beyond the scope of what Yuniór, or the reader, can ever know or communicate. Additionally, this passage suggests that the *páginas en blanco* have the ability to speak, connecting the lack of writing with a need for speech. This, again, depicts the *páginas en blanco* as stories that have yet to be told rather than absences in stories. As the pages have the potential to speak, they also take on narrative agency separate from the individual people who know the stories. Further, the slippage between language of text and language of orality exemplifies the hybrid storytelling methods that construct the novel: rather than using oral storytelling and written storytelling side by side, the novel intertwines these storytelling methods along with others to create alternative forms of communicating story that deemphasize power dynamics between different story sources. This is further depicted when Yuniór writes, “Even your watcher has his silences, his *páginas en blanco*”

(149). Silence becomes conflated with a supposed lack of writing in a way that can feel dangerous, as the *páginas en blanco* present themselves as a possible hindrance to understanding stories, even if they themselves aren't a lack of story. This depiction of *páginas en blanco* as both silences and potential speech helpfully communicates the complex nature of these blank pages as they hold (sometimes silenced) untold stories.

Although “Zafa,” a counterspell to the violence of *fukú*, usually refers to written story, the blank page can also be *Zafa*. In this way, a blank page isn't just a lack of writing but an alternative mode of marking stories. Keeping in mind Oscar's dream, Yuniór has a similar dream about Oscar, where “Dude is holding up a book...It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (325). These two dreams, as they resemble Oscar's dream, allow for communication between Oscar and Yuniór, as Yuniór must recognize Oscar's blank pages, or untold stories, and then narrate them for him. This shared narrative disrupts conventional notions of how history and story should be told, as one person's story becomes a collective story. The two different iterations of the dreams Yuniór describes here elicit opposite reactions: in the first one, Oscar is present, his eyes are smiling, and the book's pages are blank. Yuniór deems this dream “*Zafa*.” In the other version of the dream, instead of the pages, Oscar's face is blank, and Yuniór wakes up screaming. Yuniór's description of these dreams articulates the difference between blank pages and blank faces in terms of storytelling possibility and danger. The image of Oscar with no face in this dream is reminiscent of the image of the man with no face that occurs throughout the book, always as a symbol of something terrifying. This illustrates that while the telling of history can and should be collective as a means of healing, people must retain their identities to

assert personal narratives as part of history. The “Zafa” here is remarkable as well—in contrast to the understanding of this novel as a Zafa (writing into the violent blank spaces of history), here, the blank book is a Zafa. There is a clear contrast between blank pages and blank faces; although neither represent only one thing, they still communicate radically different things. Even while páginas en blanco demonstrate the silencing violence of dictatorship, they also establish a form of storytelling that allows blank pages to hold stories that can’t be written down. In this way, it becomes clear that blank pages aren’t simply an absence, but a marker of what exists but isn’t written. Therefore, even as this novel asserts the importance of written language in telling stories, it also posits that not writing down stories can be just as valid.

Similar to some uses of the páginas en blanco, the blank lines mark words that exist, and maybe have been spoken, but resist being recorded in written text. Blank lines seem to be used in place of specific words, as in “____ ____, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness” (301). These blank lines appear a few different times in the novel, with different characters “speaking” or thinking them. Like many of the references, allusions, and languages in the novel, these blanks can be seen as a way of pushing the reader out. But they also suggest that not everything can be written in a way that makes sense in a traditional narrative form, and that these words resist being recorded. At another point, Yuniór says, “I’d finally try to say the words that could have saved us. ____ ____” (327). It is likely that Yuniór knows what these words are, and as he’s never said them out loud, neither Lola nor the reader will ever know them. As such, it is clear that these words hold important meaning, and possibly that allowing the reader to know these words would diminish their meaning. The blank lines in the novel seem to represent words that have some kind of magical, saving power. The reader never gets to access these words, but knows that they exist. In this way, the blank lines

resist the notion that words need to be written in order to be real. Few critics have examined these blank lines, possibly because the absence of language poses a challenge to literary criticism. As the blank lines are incorporated into the text, they become not an absence of language, but a marker of language that mainstream audiences don't get to access.

In this way, blanks become part of the hybrid language that makes up the text; they ask readers to accept even what they can't understand as valuable elements of story. This simultaneously suggests that words can be a means of saving and that blank space can be just as valid as spoken and written language, not necessarily as a means of saving, but as a means of knowing the value of words. This quote presents words as similar to Zafa; however, as these words are never written or spoken, they may not be able to save. Lauren Grantz very helpfully explains the dangerous tendency of readers to seek closure in a reading experience as they make moves to understand the characters as having healed from trauma. In highlighting how the novel makes a critique of this desire for literature to heal all wounds, she makes space for understanding these blank spaces as potentially suggesting that while words hold value, no few written or spoken words can fully save or heal. Although it sometimes appears as though written words are the key to disrupting oppressive structures, the ability to leave blank space in narratives gives a new, resistant strength to historical narratives.

Unlike the *páginas en blanco*, the figure of the man with no face doesn't establish a new form of language or storytelling. However, he demonstrates the ways in which blankness can still be dangerous, even as it allows for alternative modes of communicating stories. This novel does not depict having no identity or no name as empowering; rather, giving, saying, and writing names becomes an act of decolonization. The man with no face appears throughout the novel and always seems to communicate something confusing, impossible, and terrifying, but real. This

terrifying figure connects the anxiety-inducing nature of blankness with the danger of not having an identity. As such, blankness becomes linked to namelessness: a dangerous symptom of colonial violence. Speaking of Beli as a child after she moves in with La Inca, Yunion writes, “for the first time in her life she began to remember her dreams...she had the whole variety, from flying to being lost, and even dreamt about the Burning, how her ‘father’s’ face had turned blank the moment he picked up the skillet. In her dreams she was never scared. Would only shake her head. You’re gone, she said. No more” (261). When La Inca takes Beli in, Beli has her own name and her own identity for the first time in her conscious life. In her dream, her “father” and his blank face depict a violent, dangerous, and traumatic moment for Beli. However, she is not scared. Once she has the possibility for her own safety, agency, and identity, she can overcome her fear of the man with no face.

At other times, the man with no face seems to communicate foreboding danger, as when Oscar is being driven to the cane fields,

He stared out into the night, hoping that maybe there would be some U.S. Marines out for a stroll, but there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face, but then the killers got back into the car and drove...and yet this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he’d been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than *déjà vu*, but before he could focus on it the moment slipped away, drowned by his fear, and then the two men told him to stop and turn around (299).

Here, the man with no face is someone who had the potential to save Oscar from facing severe violence, but he does nothing. The man with no face is both a recurring figure in the novel, and the subject of something “worse than *déjà vu*” in this moment. This figure connects Oscar to

Beli, but in this confusing way that he doesn't quite have time to figure out, as "the moment slipped away, drowned by his fear." The man both bridges the gap in time between Beli and Oscar's experiences, and doesn't allow for enough time to understand the situation. This confusion of time brings up Oscar's "eternal return," an inescapable circular return to dictatorial violence. As Oscar re-experiences his mother's horrifying encounter with state violence, identities become intertwined, enacting the cyclical nature of colonial violence through generations. This lack of individuated identity is dangerous, and the man's facelessness represents that danger, as he declines to interrupt this cyclical violence.

Beli's experiences with the man with no face further illustrate his danger, as well as his movement through generations. When Beli is being driven to the cane fields prior to facing extreme violence, "when she looked up she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn't have a face*. All the strength fell right out of her" (141). Even as this cop is already depicted as a violent figure, his missing face is what ultimately terrifies Beli to the point where she feels that she loses her strength. Without a face, and without a specific identity, this cop can stand in for anyone, harkening back to Lola's statement that "Ten million Trujillos are all we are" (324). At another point when Beli is being driven back to Santo Domingo, Yuniior writes, "but our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she past but before she could confirm it the pueblito vanished into the dust" (135). This moment is depicted as almost unreal, but still distinctly felt by Beli. The man with no face is one element of story that is hard to communicate and never quite seems real, but still needs to be validated as a form of alternative truth and understanding. Even as his blank face is dangerous, the fact that Beli and Oscar both see him in these fleeting surreal moments marks a form of intergenerational

communication that can't necessarily be captured in another way. As such, Beli's and Oscar's visions must be accepted as truths and realities of the story, even if they don't seem to make sense with the world that we're familiar with. Additionally, it's worth noting that "didn't have a face" and "had no face" are italicized in both of these moments with Beli. Throughout the novel, Díaz chooses not to italicize the Spanish words, disrupting a literary norm of italicizing non-English words in English texts. In this way, he refuses to other any aspect of language, allowing the hybridity of the language to dismantle hierarchical and colonial understandings of language. In that context, this usage of italics for the man with no face takes on deeper meaning. The italics are a form of emphasizing the words to highlight the startling nature of the man, but they also potentially serve to other him as marginal to or outside the norm of the text. The italics visually mark the blankness on the page, again using a visual presence to call attention to the visual absence of the man's face. Using italics specifically, Díaz others the man with no face, deeming him dangerous and somewhat un-understandable. In having no identity, he inscribes colonial violence on the text, disrupting the resistant work that the novel is doing.

In understanding the man with no face as a site of colonial violence in the novel, it's important to note the spatial and temporal locations when the characters see him. Both of Beli's visions of the man with no face, along with Oscar's, take place in the Dominican Republic; every other vision of him takes place in a dream. This places the man with no face in the physical space of colonial violence and of trauma. Later, Yunior dreams about the man with no face in the United States. This passing along of the image of the man with no face demonstrates the circular nature of colonial violence, and also the ways in which it changes shape through generations as they get further removed from the Dominican Republic and the first hand experiences of trauma. Speaking of Lola's daughter, Isis, Yunior says: "And she will have a

dream of the No Face Man” (330). Although the dream itself might be scary, the knowledge that she will have this dream is somewhat comforting, as it’s something that connects the familial generations and serves as a means of passing down knowledge. Additionally, Yuniór says this in the context of hoping that Isis will reach a clearer understanding of what’s happened to her family members, hopefully arriving at a Zafa of sorts. In this way, the dream will help her reach something better, and potentially break the cycle of violence even as she perpetuates the cyclical dream. Isis then becomes a site of the beauty and importance of individual identity, as Yuniór says of him and Lola, “We take turns saying her daughter’s name” (327). Even in the context of the missing identity in the man with no face, Isis represents the possibility of both connecting to her family by following their work to make sense of story and of still maintaining her own name and her own identity.

In examining the terrifying nature of facelessness and a lack of recognizable identity, the novel also asserts the importance of names in centralizing marginalized peoples. One of the epigraphs reads, “Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to **Galactus**?” This frames the whole novel in relation to “brief, nameless lives”; while there is by no means a singular project that the novel takes on, it does do real work to give meaning and give names to these brief lives. At one point in the novel where Oscar feels hope for a new romantic relationship, Yuniór writes, “The next day he woke up feeling like he’d been unshackled from his fat, like he’d been washed clean of his misery, and for a long time he couldn’t remember why he felt this way, and then he said her name” (40). Although heterosexual romantic love or sex isn’t the solution to colonial violence, or likely even the solution to all of Oscar’s frustrations, Oscar saying his crush’s name here is key. In saying her name, as opposed to simply thinking about her, he gives her identity, and for a moment, frees himself. Of course this can’t last, but still asserting the names of

typically marginalized peoples and characters works against the danger of “nameless lives,” the man with no face, and the erasure of identity that is tied to colonial violence.

As Junot Díaz says in an interview about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, “I think more than anything I was just trying to get people to acknowledge how much of what we call ‘Caribbean history and culture’ is, in reality, one vast silence. So this book was more of an arrow to what's missing. And the ‘página en blanco’ is just a metaphor for that. Of course it encourages people to do the same, to try to fill in. But my whole dream was to get the community I was born in to recognize that it had a hole the size of its country in the middle of itself” (Moreno 539).

This serves as a helpful reminder that even as páginas en blanco mark stories that are known but can't be shared, they also represent the stories that have been lost and missing due to the ways colonialism and dictatorship “disappeared” people, disappearing their history along with them. But the páginas en blanco do more than serve as a metaphor; they make space for new narrative forms, as the blank lines make space for new modes of language. This understanding of “Caribbean history and culture” as “one vast silence,” even as it frames silence as negative or dangerous, positions silence as a particular mode of history. In asking his community to recognize this massive hole, Díaz also asks for recognition of blanks and silences as modes of holding and communicating stories.

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