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T.S. Miller

Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), Junot Díaz's much-decorated debut novel, took the literary scene by storm and many readers by surprise, as its extended engagement with the genres of science fiction and fantasy lacks almost any precedent in the author's corpus of unequivocally "mainstream" short stories, including his 1996 collection *Drown* as well as a number of pieces placed in *The New Yorker*.¹ Indeed, unlike the novel's title character, a Dominican-American "nerdboy" who aspires to become "the Dominican Tolkien" (192) or "[t]he Dominican Stephen King" (27), Díaz, in his earlier short fiction, had begun to establish himself as a writer more closely resembling "the Dominican Raymond Carver."² Although no one could mistake *Oscar Wao* for a science fiction novel, questions of where the genre fits into both the literary world and the world of human experience recur throughout the book; Díaz, consciously writing not from within the genre but about it, does not, like some contemporary authors, actively attempt to transgress or collapse the boundaries between "realistic" literary fiction and "fantastic" genre fiction. Instead, Díaz offers us a fairly realistic narrative in which he nevertheless scrutinizes these same boundaries, emphasizing the very marginality of "the genre ghetto" as one of the most significant aspects of a form such as science fiction. Although the narrator himself attempts to maintain a certain distance from Oscar's fanatical devotion to sf, his own appreciation of the genre ultimately legitimates it as a powerful lens through which to view the world.

In this article I will concern myself chiefly with the ways in which Díaz employs the discourse of science fiction, but I must first recognize its place as but one of the many discourses upon which he draws: Díaz has not produced a novel about a single marginalized genre, but one that speaks to the entire idea of genres.³ Of course, I can only map a partial genealogy of the various genres to which the novel might belong, but *Oscar Wao* also owes some debt to the highbrow *New Yorker* aesthetic, the immigrant novel, the family saga, the secret history, the Latin American *novela del dictador* (dictator novel), the growing body of Dominican American literature, and, as Díaz points out in an interview with *Callaloo*, also "the African Diaspora tradition" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904). We see this extreme blending of genres and traditions even in the novel's pair of epigraphs: Díaz precedes a long passage from the poem "The Schooner *Flight*" by Nobel laureate Derek Walcott with a line taken from an issue of *The Fantastic Four*: "Of what import are brief, nameless lives ... to Galactus?" This incredible juxtaposition contains a series of juxtapositions, as the Walcott poem already treats the complex subject of hybridity and creolization in the Antilles: "I have a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English

in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (Walcott 346). Lastly, some elements of the novel's plot also invite comparison with the increasingly nebulous category designated "magic realism," a fantastic literary tradition comparable to but distinct from the vigorously Anglophone genre Oscar conceives of as "science fiction." While Díaz even makes direct reference to the legacy of magic realism—"It [zafa, a counterspell] used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo" (7)—his materialist or at least skeptical explanations of, for instance, the family curse called the fukú or his characters' visions of a mongoose protector spirit, in fact differ markedly from the sustained magic realism of a writer such as Gabriel García Márquez.⁴ Consequently, we should no more dub *Oscar Wao* a work of magic realism than we should nominate it for a Nebula, yet none of this prevents Díaz from commenting upon this "genre" along with all of the others he includes in the novel.

Science fiction, as the genre among genres, as it were, simply steals the spotlight. Since, however, the novel has so little to do with science fiction on the level of plot, we must turn elsewhere to examine how Díaz engages with the genre; there seems no better place to begin any discussion of the novel than with the idiosyncratic narrator and his idiosyncratic approach to narration. Yunior, the impossibly homodiegetic narrator—to use and then complicate Gérard Genette's term—does function as a character within the narrative, yet as the near-omniscient narrator he truly contains multitudes, filtering through his own voice a number of other characters' voices, different modes of narration, and events and experiences foreign to him.⁵ At the same time, Yunior cultivates a distinct, consistent persona of his own: Díaz fills the novel with a prodigious number of allusions to sf, but we quickly understand that it is not only Oscar the "fat sci-fi-reading nerd" (19) who frames his experience in the terms of genre fiction, but also his far more macho ex-roommate, the self-avowed repentant playboy who takes it upon himself to tell Oscar's story and indeed that of the entire de León/Cabral family.⁶ Consider one of the novel's most often quoted passages, the veritable epic catalogue of Oscar's nerdiness:

Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic.... Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. (21)

Only a fellow nerd, of course, could craft so meticulous a description; even here, however, Yunior admits that he had always concealed his own love of genres, a feat he makes abortive efforts to replicate throughout the novel, particularly in the chapter "Sentimental Education," in which his character first shares a dorm room with Oscar: "Do you know what sign the fool put up on our dorm door? *Speak, friend, and enter*. In fucking Elvish! (Please don't ask me how I knew this. Please.) When I saw that I said: De León, you gotta be kidding. Elvish?" (171-72; emphasis in original). At all points Yunior's narratorial persona belies the picture

of himself he paints as a scorner of sci-fi, and, in many ways, the Yuniór of *Oscar Wao* bears more resemblance to Oscar himself than to the Yuniór(s) of *Drown*.⁷

And why? Why have the infrequent references to science fiction in Díaz's earlier work exploded into the nerdfest that is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a development that seems to make even Yuniór a little nervous?⁸ We first begin to see Díaz's serious engagement with the genre taking shape in his post-*Drown* short story "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," the title of which, incidentally, would suit an sf story just fine.⁹ In addition to using the entire genre as a metaphor—"The Vice-President waves his hand and shots of Barceló appear so fast you'd think it's science fiction" (69)—the narrator also employs the kind of simile that will pervade *Oscar Wao*: "then the Letter hits like a 'Star Trek' grenade" (66). Here, as in *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór recognizes science fiction as a legitimate part of literary and cultural discourse. Some of his references in the novel even take on the character of classical allusions; Yuniór, for example, repeatedly compares the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo to the Lord of the Rings himself, and Oscar's great aunt to a Bene Gesserit witch: "But La Inca insisted, used the Voice on them" (257). It is not, I would like to stress, simply that Frank Herbert has become his Homer and Tolkien his Virgil, nor can we chalk up Yuniór's penchant for Ringwraith metaphors and superhero similes to some unfortunate stylistic tic. Again, the real significance lies in Díaz's juxtaposition of sf with other discourses: in "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," Yuniór includes a canonical literary allusion, describing how his girlfriend "Bartlebys" him (67), and his invocation of "some serious Island voodoo" (71) smacks of folklore and fukú. Likewise, in *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór compares Oscar's mother Belicia to both the faithful Homeric heroine—"Turns out that in her heart our girl was more Penelope than Whore of Babylon" (109)—and that grizzled icon of American literature: "[Beli] set out to track down Jack Pujols with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who" (95). Even the novel's title alludes to both Oscar Wilde and the famous short story by Hemingway, a writer whose no-nonsense prose could hardly steer any clearer of the fantastic. In short, sf does not replace or supplant any other discourse in *Oscar Wao*, but rather Yuniór simply augments his literary arsenal with all the high-tech armaments of genre.

Of course, Díaz is hardly the first "serious" writer to indulge in a panoply of popular-culture references, nor is he the first to cast a nerdboy as his hero: we might recall *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon's 2001 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, a tale of not one but two marginalized nerdboys—one gay, both Jewish—who become kings of the pulps during the Golden Age of comics. Moreover, as early as 1963, Robert Conquest felt confident enough to begin an essay entitled "Science Fiction and Literature" by making the point that, because of its friends in high literary places, the genre "scarcely need[ed] defending in any ordinary sense" (355).¹⁰ What Díaz brings to the debate about the relationship of sf to the mainstream we see largely in his use of the genre itself as a grand metaphor; I have already enumerated a few instances in which Díaz metonymically invokes the name of the genre, a conceit he repeats in a short autobiographical account of his first glimpse of New York

City: "The city looked like science fiction" ("New York" 964).¹¹ As it was for the young Junot Díaz, so Yunior and Oscar both conceive of sf as a kind of lens—at times the only lens—through which they can view and better understand their experiences. For an example of a comparison between the immigrant experience and science fiction, we need look no farther than another often-blurbed passage: "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto" (*Oscar Wao* 21 n.6).¹² In at least one interview, Díaz has explicitly appealed to this idea of genre as lens:

To understand race relationships, you can read history all you want, but you'd be better off in America reading some of the genre stories, looking at some of the fantasy novels. I think these lenses are important ... without them, America will elude you. Realistic fiction fails to describe the New World experience. (Fitzsimons)

Always insisting, however, that sf serves as one fitting lens for understanding human experience rather than the best or only possible lens, Díaz, in his novel, eschews any of the strident genre apologetics that characterize a certain strand of sf criticism, at the same time that he praises the vitality of the genre.¹³

Here is where the difference between Oscar's undying love of "Genres" with a capital G and Yunior's own appreciation of them becomes important (17). Yunior foregrounds this divergence when he vacillates about his decision to frame the story of the de León family using the concept of the fukú:

I'm not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation. Fukú story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He'd ask: What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? (6)

The crucial difference here seems to lie in the phrase, "the kind of story we were *all* living in": Yunior perforce allows for the possibility that not everyone may find sf the appropriate metaphor to describe his or her experience of New York City. Thus, Yunior understands his own science-fictional lens as somehow "local," perhaps in the Lyotardian sense, rather than universally applicable and all-embracing, while Oscar's way of understanding the world essentially ascribes "master narrative" status to the single lens of sf: "by high school his commitment to the Genres had become absolute" (20).¹⁴

Although I would not describe Yunior's commitment to genre fiction as absolute, I must stress that it obviously remains very serious in its own way. Simply by virtue of his tale's colossal sweep, the one-time closet nerd can at times appear an even more devout disciple of Genre than humble Oscar: Yunior, after all, attempts something Oscar never does—that is, to use the lens of science fiction to come to terms with the entire history of Oscar's family, the Dominican Republic, and perhaps the Antilles and America to boot. Indeed, Yunior has absorbed the discourse of sf to the extent that his entire narratorial persona becomes the cosmic Watcher of the *Fantastic Four* universe: he first self-identifies as the Watcher on the fourth page of the novel, and his last such reference comes only a few pages from the end. Despite the fact that Yunior chooses not to tell Oscar's story in the medium of science fiction, we see that the

genre nevertheless serves as his own metaphor for storytelling, for the act of writing itself.¹⁵ Let me again emphasize Yunior's sometimes equivocal yet always self-undermining attitude towards science fiction: although Yunior claims that Oscar would have preferred an sf story to his own fukú story, on the page immediately prior, he filters his understanding of the fukú itself through none other than the lens of sf narratives, comparing it to both "Darkseid's Omega effect" and "Morgoth's bane" (5). Moreover, soon enough Yunior ceases pretending not to agree with Oscar's assessment of the Antilles as distinctly "sci-fi": "[Oscar's love of genre] might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey" (21 n.6). Unfortunately for Yunior, "your typical Dominican male" (19), his own inner nerd holds the pen that betrays again and again his enormous allegiance to Genre.

In fact, at times the conflict among the various voices in *Oscar Wao* rises to such a pitch that the narration seems the product of more than a mere *two* Yuniors.¹⁶ Up to this point I have neglected to mention the matter of the footnotes, which in part function to turn the novel into a sort of self-annotated, self-undermining text.¹⁷ Notice that one of the "betrayals of nerdiness" described in the preceding paragraph comes from a footnote, while the other originates in the body text: Yunior does not need the annotator to give him away, for he commits plenty of such self-betrayals well above the second narrative running along the textual gutter. Nevertheless, Yunior-as-annotator appears to take particular pleasure in deflating his alter ego. For all that the two texts share a common voice and often include virtually interchangeable content, they frequently disagree on the details; some operate more subtly, but the obvious case in point is the annotator's identification of a factual error: "Leonie ... informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, 'GhettoNerd at the End of the World') wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much" (132 n.17).¹⁸ Taken as a whole, however, the narrative contained in the footnotes does not subvert but rather bolsters the account of "the other Yunior": although the annotator often claims to have appended the notes afterwards, the Yunior narrating the body text has clearly read the preceding annotations very carefully. Consider, for example, the description of Trujillo that Yunior buries in the first footnote: "A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface), came to control..." (2 n.1). The annotator will use these affectionate monikers throughout his notes, yet they eventually begin to surface without explanation in the body text, demonstrating that the discordant Yuniors who together create the text nevertheless remain intertwined readers of one another.

The footnotes, then, serve purposes beyond their undercutting of the principal narration, most obviously providing an outlet for Yunior's historiographical impulse: his secret history becomes marginal in multiple ways, a history told from the margins and *in* the margins. It would be generous to describe the historical footnotes as even faux academic, including as they do at least seven

kinds of bias on top of unsourced quotations that would make even a Wikipedia editor break down: “A tall, debonair prettyboy whose ‘enormous phallus created havoc in Europe and North America,’ Rubirosa was ... the Trujillato’s ‘happy side’” (12 n.4). Again, however, Yunior takes no pains to restrict his secret history to the footnotes: the whole novel becomes a sort of not-so-secret history, complete with all the scandalous gossip and outrageous hyperbole of the original *Anecdota* (*Secret History*) by Procopius (ca. 550). Nevertheless, the fifth chapter, the story of Oscar’s grandfather Abelard, most takes on the character of a secret history and, accordingly, also the tone of the footnotes.¹⁹ Indeed, Yunior even invokes the genre by name: “But there’s another, less-known, variant of the Abelard vs. Trujillo narrative. A secret history that claims that Abelard didn’t get in trouble because of his daughter’s culo or because of an imprudent joke” (245). Tellingly for Yunior’s larger narrative strategy, what gets Abelard into trouble is “[a] book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been *true*” (245; emphasis in original).²⁰ The ultimate secret history, Yunior must report, has been lost.

The trope of the lost book reappears several times in *Oscar Wao*—almost as if we had an Umberto Eco novel on our hands—and these apocryphal texts speak volumes about both Yunior’s ability and his need to relate the “marginal” story he has chosen. As narrator, Yunior takes it upon himself to fill in the various gaps in his various narratives: his own text endeavors to replace all those missing texts, shatter their silences, yet he seems fascinated and frustrated by his inability to resolve all of the gaps completely. For example, Yunior persistently returns to Beli’s “Lost Years” as an enslaved *criada*, one of the major gaps in the novel (85), but his autobiography contains just as many holes, as we see when he startles us with a rather major gap in the story of his own life: “After a year in Brooklyn [Lola] was now in Washington Heights, was letting her hair grow, had been pregnant once, a real moment of excitement, but she aborted it because I was cheating on her with some girl” (269). A lost book even appears—or rather fails to appear—in a peripheral footnote about the Dominican actress María Montez: “Wrote three books. Two were published. The third manuscript was lost after her death” (87 n.8). Most significantly, however, Yunior tantalizes us with the final image of Oscar’s mysterious last manuscript, “the cure to what ails us” that never arrives (333), leaving us with the sense that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* barely scratches the surface of that life.

The presence of so many gaps in the narrative naturally leads back to the question of just how the homodiegetic Yunior acquires the wealth of insider information that he does possess. How on earth—by which I mean, how in any realistic narrative—does Oscar’s ex-roommate and Lola’s on-and-off boyfriend manage to access the most intimate details of their ancestors’ lives? Has Yunior been duping us? Is *Oscar Wao* the pulpiest kind of sci-fi story after all, one in which Our Hero has been granted the power of omniscience by the mystical stone of Cognoskara? I would argue that Yunior’s narration, supernatural as it may sometimes seem, can be explained without recourse to the fantastic, even as his

self-identification with narrator figures from science fiction such as the Watcher remains one of the most important features of that narration. Indeed, we cannot dismiss the genre allusions as throwaway pop-culture references or as just another part of the architecture of postmodern pastiche, as many of them become extended conceits with a nuance and significance that far transcend the level of the obvious dictator-Sauron analogy.²¹ I have already suggested how here the specific genre comparison that Yuniór invokes ends up framing his opinions on the narrative act generally: the Watcher, “who lamps on the Blue Side of the Moon” (20 n.5), becomes the lonely observer on the margins, the very model of the modern immigrant-nerd-artist. So too, however, does Yuniór’s gap-ridden narration mirror his understanding of Genre as an attempt to order the world into one intelligible narrative. In other words, science fiction provides the metaphor for how Yuniór narrates his story, but how he narrates his story remains ever incomplete, reflecting back upon his idea that no one genre, not even his and Oscar’s beloved sf, can offer a complete or universal picture of the world.

Yes, things are starting to sound pretty postmodern. We must keep in mind that postmodern fiction—along with its self-created precursors like *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)—had already issued similar challenges to narrative conventions and narrative sense.²² Yet Yuniór’s narration owes the most immediate stylistic debt neither to sf nor to, as Díaz phrases it, “the postmodern white-boy gang” (Danticat 92). I would instead propose Salman Rushdie as the writer who makes for the most illuminating point of comparison.²³ Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children* (1981), possesses a “miracle-laden omniscience” (170) that Yuniór’s own casually omniscient narration very much recalls, though Rushdie grounds his narrative firmly in the realm of magic realism, offering a supernatural explanation for how Saleem achieves this privileged position: as a child born at the exact moment of India’s independence, he has acquired a telepathic gift that allows him to listen in on the thoughts of any Indian he chooses, as a sort of “All-India Radio” receiver (186). This gift, however, does not by any means allow Saleem to become an impeccably accurate narrator, and he is the first to emphasize his own unreliability: “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail” (14). In both novels, then, the narrators above all strive to fill in those troublesome gaps not with facts but with story, and indeed Yuniór behaves much like a Saleem stripped of supernatural ability; we should also note that Saleem does end up losing his gift without losing the impulse to tell his tale.²⁴

Strange to say, however, Little-Piece-of-the-Moon Saleem can seem downright straightforward compared to Yuniór, who attempts to remain much more circumspect about *how* he navigates the gaps, never openly admitting that his entire narrative project consists in supplementing his scant knowledge with conjecture, or in rounding out secondhand tales with poetic license. Often, even when Yuniór narrates events in which he took no part, the sheer confidence with which he reports them implicitly casts him as the standard survivor-witness, as if he were Ishmael quoting Job’s “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee”

(509).²⁵ Thanks to his self-undermining tendencies, however, Yunior's façade of unquestionable narratorial authority slips on occasion: "[I]nfo 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). Still, these gaps in his otherwise "miraculous" omniscience can appear arbitrary, and, in order to make sense of just what Díaz is up to, we must establish a general explanation—or spectrum of explanations—for how Yunior, this apparent "All-Hispaniola Radio," could even begin to create his story based on information conceivably available to his character.

All we get are hints, the most intriguing of which take the form of offhand references to primary accounts that may have passed Yunior's way: journals he admits to snooping in, letters he may have read, possibly even audio recordings (160) and photographs (275) he could have somehow acquired—both aural and ocular proof, as it were. In spite of the abundance of such documents, Yunior rarely offers actual intradiegetic excerpts from them. For instance, Yunior traces only a few snatches of Oscar's own words to letters: "It's like I swallowed a piece of heaven, he wrote to his sister in a letter" (47); "I'm the permanent bachelor, he wrote in a letter to his sister, who had abandoned Japan to come to New York to be with me" (267); "It's hard to explain, he wrote his sister later" (317). We see that, yes, Yunior could have accessed these letters via Lola, but we must then ask if a handful of epistles to a sibling could furnish the intricate detail with which Yunior tells Oscar's story. In fact, Yunior often expresses the most doubt about his narrative when the event he is describing originates in an identifiable source and not his casual omniscience: "[Oscar] wrote almost three hundred pages if his letters are to be believed" (320). Thus, Yunior makes no effort to locate his knowledge strictly in documentary sources, raising the question of why he even includes them in his text at all, if his narration quite self-consciously does not require them for inspiration or validation.

These teasing references to journals and letters only proliferate as the story of Oscar's life approaches its denouement, and Yunior admits to a perpetual voyeurism: "Was I really reading my roommate's journal behind his back? Of course I was" (185). Yet, while we may understand Yunior as an absolute voyeur, he is not a stalker but simply an *author*. Scattered as the pieces are, all the evidence confirms Yunior's adherence to Saleem's narratorial praxis of unrestrained elaboration and embroidery, even as he attempts to lend his narrative a veneer of authenticity by pretending to base much or all of it in source material. I would locate the most obvious cases of embroidery towards the conclusion of the novel, with the majority of them following the chapter subheading "THE CONDENSED NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN TO A NATIVELAND" (272), which serves as more than an allusion to Aimé Césaire. Accordingly, I would suggest that we read the sixth chapter—and indeed the whole novel—as more of an *expanded* notebook than a condensed one: Oscar does quite a bit of writing during his return to the Dominican Republic, but, in the end, Yunior does even more.

By way of illustration, allow me to demonstrate the impossibility of the following scene: "I'm in Heaven, [Oscar] wrote in his journal. Heaven? His

cousin Pedro Pablo sucked his teeth with exaggerated disdain. *Esto aquí es un maldito infierno*" (275; emphasis in original). Here Oscar's intradiegetic narration appears to intermingle with Yuniór's diegesis in a way intelligible only to Yuniór: when, where, and how are we to understand Pedro's response to the sentence that Oscar has written in his journal? I will not adduce all the possibilities, but only point out that we have no way of choosing from among them based on the evidence Yuniór provides. As if to underscore the point, a few pages later Yuniór pulls the very same trick, first giving us a few of Oscar's words: "now that's entertainment, he wrote in his journal" (276). Yuniór then implies, without any explanation for the connection, that days or even weeks later Oscar's uncle has somehow become aware of what Oscar had privately written: "now *that*, his tío Rudolfo said, is entertainment" (277; emphasis in original). Since Yuniór does let us know that the respective events described by Oscar and his uncle take place in different parts of the country, we see that it is only Yuniór's *text* that has managed to collapse the interval between them. Indeed, perhaps Rudolfo never said such a thing at all, and Yuniór as author has imposed the connection on his narrative. I suppose we could imagine a scenario in which Oscar narrates the story he had written in his journal to his uncle, causing his uncle to reply by echoing those words, but, in a sense, that is just the problem: *we could imagine*. These exchanges only make complete sense in Yuniór's head, or rather in the artificial construct that is his narrative. In this understated fashion, Yuniór reveals the authorial sleight of hand he has been practicing throughout the novel.

Contrasted with Rushdie's Saleem, then, Yuniór comes across as much more ambivalent, even guilty, about his own authorial manipulations, with the consequence that at the same time that he matter-of-factly pretends to a sort of unquestionably omniscient viewpoint, he cannot help but drop hints about his own role in constructing the narrative. As another result of Yuniór's reluctance to admit that the author must inevitably order his narrative in his own way—his one way—he often chooses to describe events in the story as undecidable, intentionally shifting the burden of "truth-making" to his audience.²⁶ In fact, the most significant gaps in *Oscar Wao* may lie not in the missing plot points, but in Yuniór's spotty account of his own narration: we are left to fill in that great gap between the author and ourselves.²⁷ For instance, one could make the argument, as I have, that Yuniór gains only a partial knowledge of his story from letters and photos, and that he then proceeds to fill in the rest like any storyteller. Even so, Díaz has designed the novel to permit a reading that instead ascribes something supernatural to Yuniór's all-seeing eye, or at the very least something defiantly postmodern and antirealist. At almost all points, Yuniór presents two or more such options to us, two or more valid ways of viewing the world: take this discourse or leave it.

Not surprisingly, one of the clearest instances of Yuniór's presentation of multiple options centers on the conflict between the fantastic and the realistic. For one, Yuniór establishes the ontological status of the fukú as contested from the novel's beginning. Although Yuniór promises that he, "your humble Watcher," will identify the killer of JFK and "reveal once and for all God's Honest Truth"

(4), he proceeds to blame all of the untimely deaths in the Kennedy family and the entire Vietnam debacle on the Dominican fukú, here with a sense of self-conscious absurdity that distinguishes Yunior's concept of fukú from the kind of family curse that may appear in García Márquez. Indeed, Yunior even goes so far as to say, "Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point" (5). We get the sense throughout the novel that we are supposed to take the fukú a different kind of seriously, as Yunior himself does. Other potentially supernatural events cluster around the appearances of the Mongoose—who may be a spirit or an alien or a hallucination or none of the above (151)—and in the tale of Abelard's downfall:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here. 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 Cabral's 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 but nothing more. Which is to say if you're looking for a full story, I don't have it. Oscar searched for it too, in his last days, and it's not certain whether he found it either. (243)

Although he seems to come down against superstition himself, again and again Yunior refuses to rule out the fantastic, above all recognizing it as another lens that can evoke at least some kind of truth. In short, fantasy numbers among the great undecidables, just like his own status as narrator.²⁸ We even see these two elements juxtaposed: "Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco. Beyond the Source Wall few have ventured" (149). Yunior's inability to dismiss, accept, or account for the fantastic translates into another gap that manifests in his mode of narration: we must decide, or, like him, decide not to decide.

Perhaps it would be helpful to examine at greater length how these issues find reinforcement in the genre metaphors Yunior chooses for his role as narrator: the ubiquitous Watcher and, I would add, the Lensman. We should first note that both of these key borrowings originate in the very pulpiest of the pulps: Yunior not only defends highly literary science fiction, but he also promotes the validity of space melodrama. Of course, although Díaz peppers the novel with references to the works of E.E. "Doc" Smith, the so-called "Father of Space Opera" (Clute 1123), Yunior admittedly never compares himself to a Galactic Patrolman. I am not, however, drawing this comparison simply because it dovetails so nicely with my own conceit of the genre as lens; rather, I feel that the powers of the Lens, a sort of "[c]ombination radio-phone, automatic language-converter, telepath, and so on" (Smith 104), parallel the narratorial abilities Yunior arrogates to himself far too closely to be coincidental.²⁹ The more important of these two metaphors, however, remains that of the Watcher, which Yunior even traces to its source (92

n.10). The significance of this choice rests in the Watcher's position of observer out on the margins, but also, I would argue, in the policy of non-interference that governs his race.³⁰ Likewise, Yunior as a character interferes very little in the trajectory of the narrative, doing nothing to prevent Oscar's suicide attempt or his tragic-heroic death, yet perhaps he, like the maverick Uatu, violates the directive by exercising that inevitable narratorial "interference" over the story he tells. In a sense, Yunior plays up the way in which the Watcher observes, again striving to suppress the fact that *this* Watcher also tells—tells and alters events in their telling.

Yunior the Watcher uses his "telepathic" Lens most radically in order to get inside Lola's head, a feat that would seem to require nothing short of such a fantastic device to achieve, as his relationship with Lola resounds with failures to understand her, or perhaps women generally. I understand Yunior as the sole controlling intelligence of the text, and thus I read "Wildwood," the chapter ostensibly told in Lola's voice, as mediated through him as well, albeit in a different way than the other chapters.³¹ I even attribute the opening line of the chapter to Yunior's voice: "It's never the changes we want that change everything" (51). Next, our one and only Watcher creates the appearance of "handing off" the narration to Lola by means of a long italicized passage that makes exclusive use of the second person, culminating in the words, "*And it's in that bathroom where it all begins. Where you begin*" (54; emphasis in original). The second person here functions as a sort of intermediate stage between Yunior's and Lola's respective first-person voices, a shared ground that Yunior only grudgingly yields, if indeed he yields any at all. Like Yunior and Oscar, Lola often understands her experience in terms of science fiction, dropping allusions such as "[b]right lights zoom through you like photon torpedoes" (53) and "I started to think that maybe it was like in the books; as soon as I lost my virginity I lost my power" (65). This similarity, however, is insufficient to prove Yunior as the mediator, since Lola has endured her own Golden Age of nerdery: "I was the tallest, dorkiest girl in the school, the one who dressed up as Wonder Woman every Halloween" (57). Nevertheless, I maintain that Lola's voice employs the sf lens largely because of Yunior's influence; I would first point to certain echoes of Yunior's characteristic tone: "If you think it was tough being a goth in Paterson, try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in the DR" (71). More conspicuously, when Lola's voice returns later in the novel, Yunior maneuvers her words to serve his own ends. As Part II begins, we naturally expect the words, "Of course I tried once more" (205), to preface Oscar's own description of a second suicide attempt: Yunior has set us up to hear at last from the title character, but he deliberately deceives us with the particular words that he has chosen to assign to Lola's voice. Significantly, however, Yunior the annotator leaves Lola's sections alone; it is as if, in an attempt to understand them, Yunior struggles to allow his female characters to speak in their own voices, yet cannot fully surrender control of the narrative.

Immediately after Lola's long chapter concludes, Yunior moves swiftly to reassert himself with the breadth of his knowledge and the virtuosity of his own voice: "Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar

and Lola like a dream..." (77). In the chapters that follow, particularly those that chronicle the lives of Beli and Abelard, Yuniór's regulation of the narrative becomes much more pronounced, if only because he continues to speak in his own voice. The focalization varies, but quite often Yuniór chooses to dominate these narratives in which he plays no role by applying the lens of genre fiction to the actions, thoughts, feelings, and even dialogue of his characters, for whom such references are frequently anachronistic and always totally foreign. For instance, when Yuniór describes Beli's crush as "a haughty slender melnibonian" (89), we understand that, while she does not perceive him in this way, in another sense the genre reference—to Michael Moorcock's *ELRIC* stories—perfectly describes not only what the boy is like but also how Beli sees him: Yuniór has simply "translated" her feelings into the discourse of science fiction. Such cases abound in Beli's chapter: "Like the accidental discovery of the One Ring. Like stumbling into the wizard Shazam's cave or finding the crashed ship of the Green Lantern! Hypatía Belicia Cabral finally had power and a true sense of self" (94). Furthermore, when Yuniór moves forward and backward to her father Abelard, the narrator's own lens again invades and reshapes the character's interiority in the process of reporting it: "He tried to remain calm—fear, as *Dune* teaches us, is the mind-killer—but he could not help himself" (238). One such example, however, stands out from the rest, because it occurs on the level of the actual words that Yuniór places in a character's mouth: speaking of Trujillo, Abelard's lover Lydia warns him, "Now He has his Eye on you" (229). The capitalization of the word "Eye," of course, refers directly to Sauron's Lidless Eye; the absence of quotation marks around his dialogue allows Yuniór to slip in this anachronistic genre allusion possibly unnoticed, but a careful reading reveals it as another self-undermining reminder that Yuniór mediates every single word in his novel.

In a sense, Yuniór adopts the voice of the Yuniór from the year 1988 as easily as that of Beli or Lola, in a kind of curious self-mediation upon which I have already touched.³² At one point, we see the two Yuniórs—the closet nerd and the card-carrying nerd—warring it out on the same page: Yuniór ridicules how Oscar uses a pickup line such as "If you were in my game I would give you an *eighteen* Charisma!" (174; emphasis in original), but in the next paragraph he unthinkingly makes his own genre reference: "Trying to talk sense to Oscar about girls was like trying to throw rocks at Unus the Untouchable" (174). This second voice obviously emerges victorious, both in this chapter and in the narrative at large; after all, although Oscar suffers from unrequited love so severely that he "lose[s] interest in the final issues of *Watchmen*" (45), Yuniór keeps up as a dedicated fan throughout the novel, prominently referring to the last issue of the series in the ending of his book. Indeed, our Watcher, reading Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (1986-87), imports that sense of infinite regress into the narrative, and Oscar and Yuniór share an understandable admiration for Dr. Manhattan's "Nothing ever ends" (331). Yuniór has even created a sort of ring composition in his novel,³³ and not only in his use of the traditionally cyclical family saga or the indefatigable fukú: the parting reference to an Alan Moore comic hearkens back to the epigraph from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, while the high literary allusions in the novel's title—the first words we read—reappear in the book's closing

counterpoint to Mistah Kurtz: “[Oscar] wrote: So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335). Therefore, the juxtaposition of genre and the literary brackets the entire narrative, and it is significant that both Yunior and Oscar finally incorporate both into their world-views.

In the end, what the ring composition most encloses is that same lens of genre, which can be a lens of the fantastic but is almost always a lens of marginalization, a lens of the local. It goes without saying that Díaz’s response to the marginal status of science fiction is far from the only one possible; I need not recite the full litany of crossovers and crossbreeds, or chart the mutual influence of genre and literary fiction that has occurred in various spikes and waves. I could, however, quickly point to giant figures such as J.G. Ballard or Ray Bradbury, who even decades ago could bestride the narrow genre boundary like colossi, or even Chabon, the Pulitzer winner whose next novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007), all but swept the major prizes for genre fiction. In “Trickster in a Suit of Lights” (2008), Chabon expresses admiration for those authors “working the boundary” in this way (25), while *Oscar Wao*, again, demonstrates no such openly transgressive designs. This is not to say that I think Díaz would disapprove were sf and the mainstream to come closer together or even merge, but simply that his novel does not make such a fantasy its primary concern; in fact, during the scene in which Oscar must describe his literary interests to a rival, I sense that Díaz is gently lampooning attempts to legitimize the genre by renaming it: “I’m into the more speculative genres. He knew how absurd he sounded” (43).

Indeed, Díaz seems aware of but unconcerned with the contemporary project of reconceiving the boundaries of the genre or genres, especially when they begin bleeding into one another and the mainstream. There have been numerous proposals for what to call, as Gregory Frost puts it, “all that cross-pollinated mutant stuff” (6): speculative fiction, slipstream, fabulation, magic(al?) realism, transrealism, the literary medium of the interstitial arts, the literature of the fantastic, the literature of ideas, the literature of estrangement—even skiffy. But Yunior, old nerd that he is, knows that science fiction is science fiction, at least because the mainstream establishment perceives it as such. Instead of working the margins, crossing boundaries, or trying to show that none ever existed in the first place, Díaz insists that sf and the mainstream were and are separate, and the fact of this separation is what most interests him. Consequently, *Oscar Wao* argues—if the novel can be said to have an argument—not so much that genres and their boundaries should be collapsed, but that each reader already collapses, internalizes, and reassembles them to create his or her own account.

I have chosen the particular lens of science fiction to examine here, and I do not presume to have rendered a “complete” reading of the novel.³⁴ Nevertheless, the genre appears far more important than many of the other discourses present in the book, even if only because of its status as genre *par excellence*, which helps communicate this very multiplicity of discourses and genres. Whether Yunior is describing Lola as “tougher than adamantite” (25), devoting a full page to an extended Tolkien metaphor (126), or casting his own persona as the

Watcher, sf serves as more than a handy literary tool: in a sense, it is one of the underdog heroes of the novel. The genre, for Díaz and his characters, serves as a way of understanding the world in deep ways—at times, indeed, the only available means of describing human experience.³⁵ Yunió's concomitant recognition that there is nevertheless no single way of seeing things permeates postmodern fiction, but in Yunió's quest to piece together a narrative in a patchwork of discourses, he perhaps suggests that his own creative act, idiosyncratic as it is, attempts to produce a more complete picture than either the mainstream or the genre could have achieved alone. Slippery as always, however, Yunió likely leaves even that question open, leaves the gaps for us to fill in. Yes, our humble Watcher and trusty Lensman offers us many accounts and many lenses: Oscar Wao is Francis Macomber, at last taking on the buffalo after having fled the lion; or, no, Oscar Wao is Oscar Wilde, daring to speak the name of his love; or, no, some combination of the two; or, no, something much more than all that. The overall effect the text produces reminds me of nothing so much as the motif with which Roger Zelazny begins and concludes his short story "The Engine at Heartspring's Center" (1974): "Choose any of the above and you may be right" (220); "Choose any of the above" (227).

NOTES

1. A complete catalogue of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel's honors and awards would be anything but brief: according to CBS News, "[the] bestseller has ranked on more than 35 best book lists" (Mason), and the back cover of the first trade paperback edition advertises the book as the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, a *New York Times* Notable Book, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, *Time's* #1 Fiction Book of the Year, and winner of the John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize.

2. David Gates, reviewing *Drown* for *The New York Times Book Review*, may have been among the first to make this comparison in print: "Like Raymond Carver, one of his apparent influences, Mr. Díaz transfigures disorder with a rigorous sense of form." To be sure, it would be difficult to identify many moments in *Oscar Wao* that reproduce the Carveresque "finely calibrated restraint" that Gates observes in the story "Negocios" (1996).

3. I use the generic term "science fiction" throughout this article to refer to a broad set of literary genres and subgenres that includes fantasy as well. In so doing I follow Oscar and Díaz's usage of the term, and I in no way intend to argue that we should always think of "science fiction" as some discrete, homogeneous discourse or otherwise stable category: recent science fiction criticism, together with recent hybridized works of fiction, in the mainstream and out, have demonstrated beyond doubt that no absolute or readily identifiable boundaries exist between literary fiction and "fantastic" fiction. Moreover, I acknowledge that in the academy, typologists and taxonomers abound, even as some writers in the genre(s) also desire to differentiate themselves from one another. For example, Brian W. Aldiss, a master of both the fantastic and the harder sort of science fiction, has criticized the more formulaic sword-and-sorcery strains of fantasy: "It is now possible to make a living from writing in these fustian categories" ("Oh No" 511). Conversely, in his study *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery considers how fantasy can critique science fiction proper: "The discourse of fantasy can challenge SF, partly because it pays its own tribute to science" (108). In short, I do not deny the validity of some objections to my lumping the genres together as "science fiction"—attempts to create

workable typologies for the genre(s) are often quite illuminating—but I simultaneously affirm the utility of Oscar’s intuitive sense of this thing called sf that differs, as a recognizable and marginalized category, from the mainstream.

4. Magic realism, like science fiction, is one of the great fraught labels, “a crippled term, extremely imprecise,” in Brian Evenson’s description (1). As Evenson points out, even García Márquez, the universal exemplar of the magic realist, “once stated that he wasn’t writing magic realism at all; he was writing realism” (5). Some contemporary Latin American writers such as Alberto Fuguet also seek to distinguish their work from magic realism, but for different reasons: “Unlike the ethereal world of García Márquez’s imaginary Macondo, my own world is something much closer to what I call ‘McOndo’—a world of McDonald’s, Macintoshes and condos.” Moreover, many Anglophone writers and scholars wish to collapse the categories of magic realism and otherwise fantastic fiction—Gene Wolfe has pithily remarked that “[m]agic realism is fantasy written by people who speak Spanish” (Baber 132)—yet an equal number continue to argue in favor of their strict separation. For one example of the former, see Wishnia; for one of the latter, see Bowers. It is not my intention to sort out these definitional issues of genre, nor, I believe, is it Díaz’s.

5. *Oscar Wao*, with its baroque narration, fluctuating focalizations, arbitrary annotations, obsession with gaps, and (possible) intradiegetic intrusions, provides a veritable goldmine for narratologists. Simply put, I understand Yunior as a homodiegetic narrator—i.e., one who takes part in the story’s action—who nevertheless behaves for most of the book like a heterodiegetic narrator, and one who is self-consciously not quite omniscient. For example, the first hint that the novel’s first-person narrator is not speaking from a heterodiegetic position—ambiguous and easy to miss as that hint is—does not arrive until page 36. I am not arguing that Yunior is an unprecedented narrator who defies any classification in traditional narratological terms, but rather that—if, for example, we attempt to pigeonhole him in Genette’s partly tongue-in-cheek table of the twelve possible combinations of relation, level, and focalization—we will instead find him zigzagging all over it (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 128). It could be that Yunior himself sometimes acts as an intradiegetic, homodiegetic narrator within his own extradiegetic, homodiegetic narration, but this accounting does not wholly satisfy, in part because the voice of the “other” Yuniors at times still seems mediated by the Yunior at the highest level. Genette admits to an uncertainty regarding whether he “would adhere today to the idea of an impassable boundary between the two types, hetero- and homodiegetic” (103), yet he insists that, while all other parameters may change, “*relation* (‘person’) governs in a more or less uniform way the whole of a narrative” (127; emphasis in original). I am not certain that *Oscar Wao* does not challenge this formulation, but I will leave others to attempt to pin Yunior down on the narratological level.

6. I could go one step further and point out that it is not only Oscar and Yunior who employ genre discourse in this fashion, but also their creator: Díaz adopts the same nerdboy argot in many of his recent interviews, and Stephen Colbert, for one, has lampooned his on-air use of a Triffid simile (see *Colbert Report*).

7. I have identified only two references I would describe as unambiguous genre allusions in *Drown*: in the title story, Díaz uses the phrase “science fiction combs” (116), and, in “Ysrael,” Yunior makes only the vaguest of allusions to a science fiction trope: “Rafa stood and tilted his head, as if listening to a message I couldn’t hear, something beamed in from afar” (3). In “No Face,” the disfigured boy Ysrael also pretends to possess comic book powers, but the discourse of science fiction does not bleed into the narration in the same way. Lastly, I should note that, in the later story “Nilda,” comic books and a Delany novel appear in the narrative itself but not as part of the narrative voice.

8. In 2001 Díaz published a short story titled "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" in *The New Yorker*, much of which the author would later incorporate into the first and last chapters of his novel. Díaz, however, excised the following passage, perhaps because it would have seemed too conspicuous a lie in light of Yunior's much more developed love of genre: "You never met more opposite niggers in your life" (106). Di Iorio Sandín highlights this same line, pointing out how even in the short story Yunior "protest[s] their differences too much" (123). She goes on to draw an incisive comparison with the narration of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which holds true for the novel but in a less straightforward way: "Yunior feels sufficiently involved in Oscar's fate to tell Oscar's story just as Nick Carraway [sic] told Jay Gatsby's" (123). In the novel, of course, Yunior feels sufficiently involved in the fates of a number of people and things, including but not limited to the Dominican Republic and science fiction. I will not belabor the point, but the *New Yorker* version and the novel also differ in the range and depth of genre references that define Yunior's voice: his use of the genre as lens remains much more subdued in the earlier text.

9. The phrase that serves as the title in fact appears in a strictly "mundane" context within the story, in a passage containing the narrator's diagnosis of his failing relationship with his girlfriend Magda: "Our relationship wasn't the sun, the moon, and the stars, but it wasn't bullshit either" (70).

10. Among these friends of genre, Conquest counts Kingsley Amis, whose 1960 study *New Maps of Hell* broke major ground. See also the discussion among Aldiss, Amis, and C.S. Lewis published in the first issue of *Science Fiction Horizons*.

11. Don DeLillo uses a comparable simile in his novel *Underworld* (1997), when the narrator describes how the character Gracie "rolled her eyes so far up into her head she looked like science fiction" (244).

12. I am not suggesting that Díaz is the first to link genre and ghetto, as the comparison remains ubiquitous: in a discussion of slipstream, Kessel and Kelly refer to "the ghetto of the fantastic" (4), and Jonathan Lethem likewise speaks of the "the genre ghetto" in his essay "Why Can't We All Just Live Together?" (117), a piece that provides an interesting counterpoint to what I am arguing Díaz attempts to do with *Oscar Wao*. Much earlier, Lester del Rey also famously dismissed the academic study of science fiction with "Get out of my ghetto!" (Letson 230), and Michael Chabon invokes the same metaphor in a recent essay: "For even the finest writer of horror or sf or detective fiction, the bookstore, to paraphrase the LA funk band War, is a ghetto" (21). Even so, I would continue to stress that Díaz remains much more interested in the very fact of science fiction's marginalization; it is telling that Chabon cavalierly designates some of the most non-marginalized authors in the literary canon as producers of genre fiction, presumably based on a typically revisionist understanding of the ontological status of the stuff: "A glance at any dusty paperback anthology of classic tales turns up important genre work by Balzac, Wharton, Conrad, Graves, Maugham, Faulkner, Twain, Cheever, Coppard" (18-19). In interviews, Díaz often responds evasively when compared to Lethem and Chabon—indeed, he has even accused them of "slumming" (Authors@Google)—but the works and opinions of all three are worth considering together, if not for the similarities among them, then for their differences, both subtle and conspicuous.

13. Sf critics are often the first to decry the kind of anti-realistic valorization that would crown science fiction and/or fantasy as the insuperable pinnacle of all literary expression. For instance, in the very first issue of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Lance Olsen took steps to challenge the counterproductive claim that the mainstream should give more credit to genre fiction because all fictions are fantasies, noting how it had already "become par for the course to reinvent the wheel by asserting that all narrative

is to some extent fantastic" (99). See also Gary K. Wolfe's earlier essay, "The Limits of Science Fiction."

14. These concepts derive from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (see especially xxiii-xv).

15. According to *BOMB* magazine, at the time of this writing Díaz appears to be at work on at least one or two sf novels, one of them his "very own Dominican *Akira*" (Danticat 95). In the same interview, he confesses that he aspires to become neither a King nor a Carver, but rather "a Dominican Octavia Butler or a Dominican Samuel Delany," two writers, who, although well-respected in the academy, remain firmly within the ghetto of science fiction (92).

16. In his review of *Oscar Wao* for *TLS*, Bill Broun observes that the novel is "full of a variety of polyglot discourses and jumbled geographies" (1). In addition to the novel's use of the Spanish language, *Oscar Wao* also exhibits a tremendous Bakhtinian "heteroglossia," shifting registers and genres at will.

17. Although many reviewers have compared the novel's use of footnotes to the work of the late David Foster Wallace, in his *BOMB* interview and elsewhere, Díaz identifies the true origin of the technique as the novel *Texaco* (1992) by Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau (Danticat 92).

18. Cf. Saleem Sinai's question in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: "Does one error invalidate the entire fabric?" (190). Leaving aside the question of how exactly Saleem and/or Rushdie would answer this ostensibly rhetorical question, Yuniør as annotator seems to answer, "Nah."

19. Five of the six times that the nickname "the Failed Cattle Thief" appears outside of the notes occur in this chapter (214, 216, 217, 222, and 224).

20. I cannot pronounce with absolute confidence that Díaz is directly referencing Procopius's text here, but I feel that the parallels would almost be more intriguing if more or less coincidental. After all, not only does Díaz use the phrase "secret history," the common English title of Procopius' sixth-century work, but Abelard's counter-narrative insinuates that the despot in question possesses supernatural powers, in much the same way that *The Secret History* famously reveals the literally demonic nature of the Byzantine emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora: "It was for this reason that to me and to most of us these two persons never seemed to be human beings, but rather a pair of blood-thirsty demons of some sort" (51 n.12). Procopius then produces witnesses who testify to having seen various demonic manifestations. Of course, reminiscent of the way Yuniør the annotator fills us in on the sexual escapades of the Trujillo family, there is much more to *The Secret History* than demonology: "And with this costume [the empress] would spread herself out and lie on her back on the floor. Certain menials on whom this task had been imposed would sprinkle barley grains over her private parts, and geese trained for the purpose used to pick them off with their beaks one by one and swallow them. Theodora, far from blushing when she stood up again, actually seemed to be proud of this performance" (38 n.9).

21. The reception of *Oscar Wao* in the science fiction community has been mixed. Gary K. Wolfe's review in *Locus* strikes me as the most nuanced and most appreciative of Díaz's project: "I suppose it's with mixed feelings that we finally have to admit that the bumbling arrested-male SF nerd has become ... an archetype of pop culture ... but Díaz doesn't use SF cheaply in this novel" (19). I should note, however, that Wolfe ultimately makes clear his eager anticipation of a genuine sf novel from Díaz. Dan Hartland, in his review for *Strange Horizons*, pays Díaz several compliments and opens with an astute comparison to Salman Rushdie, but I would take issue with his conception of Díaz's use of sf as a mere tool rather than one of the primary subjects of the novel. Hartland, it seems,

misses the interplay of the simultaneous gulf and affinity between Yuniór's and Oscar's respective feelings on science fiction, and it is telling that in a review of almost 2000 words Hartland does not mention Yuniór's name once, also erroneously identifying him as a layman rather than a closet nerd: "But of course [Díaz's] narrators are the outsiders, peering into Oscar's compendious collection with only the layman's awareness." The least favorable review appears in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and I must disagree with Henry Wessells on several major points. In short, I feel Wessells misapprehends Díaz's entire undertaking when he accuses the author of only *appearing* to be sympathetic to genre fiction: "[F]inally, all the genre allusions in Oscar's life and death are so many bars of a freak-show cage in which Oscar is put on display. When one pays attention to the language Díaz employs, no other conclusion can be reached" (11). Paying attention to both Díaz's language and his complex mode of narration, I find I have reached the opposite conclusion: Yuniór in fact often frames his own understanding of the world in terms of nothing other than science fiction. In effect, the biggest injustice Díaz could be said to have done to science fiction is that he fails to present the genre as the one and only way of understanding the world, or as a lens that is *always* the best one. In an unfortunate rhetorical move, Wessells even calls upon those "who dwell and write within the literature of the fantastic" to strike back, as it were, pitting genre writers against Díaz and the lifeless "mainstream": he concludes the review by implicitly accusing Díaz—or at the least writers like him, whatever that would mean—of turning "the magic of the fantastic" into so much "dull iron" (11). Wolfe, in his earlier review of Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), offers an instructive counterpoint to this attitude: "if we're all so concerned about being consigned to the gutter, why do we keep digging it deeper and worrying about who comes to visit?" (62). In fact, many years earlier Wolfe had argued against just the kind of position I feel Wessells adopts: "the common attitude of defending science fiction against the outside literary world is both critically immature and strategically unwise" ("Limits" 30).

22. Yuniór, of course, is not the first narrator to take it upon himself to tell the story of characters with whom he has had only a limited interaction. For example, in García Márquez's 1972 short story "The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother," the narrator tells us that he only ever even sees the two title characters on a single occasion. Moreover, as in *Oscar Wao*, the narrator discloses his homodiegetic identity well into his tale, surprising us with the first instance of the first-person pronoun: "It was around that time that I came to know them, their moment of greatest splendor, but I wouldn't look into the details of their lives until many years later when Rafael Escalona, in a song, revealed the terrible ending of the drama and I thought it would be good to tell the tale" (298). Other instructive comparisons could be made with *Moby Dick*'s Ishmael, the narrator-author of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and the narrators of numerous other postmodernist and/or metafictional works.

23. Again, since Díaz speaks Spanish and fetishizes a family curse, *Oscar Wao* can seem—rather deceptively so—to participate in the tradition of Latin American magic realism; but a careful reading of *Midnight's Children* suggests that most of the magic-realist elements in *Oscar Wao* have in all likelihood passed to Díaz largely through Rushdie's mediation. In a key footnote, Díaz mentions Rushdie by name: "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 n.11). I cannot trace Rushdie's influence throughout the entire text, but I will note one parallel beyond the preternatural narration: Saleem, though much less frequently than Yuniór, makes it clear that literary traditions both high and low have shaped his character, noting at one point, "Hatim Tai

and Batman, Superman and Sinbad helped me to get through the nearly nine years” (174). One of the title characters in Rushdie’s short story “Chekhov and Zulu” also applies a Tolkien metaphor to his own life: “‘Did you know, ji,’ Zulu offered, ‘that the map of Tolkien’s Middle-earth fits quite well over central England and Wales?’” (163). Moreover, a *Star Trek* conceit obviously undergirds that entire story, and Rushdie himself made an early foray into genre fiction with his 1975 novel *Grimus*, a book he describes as his “first, very unsuccessful novel, a science-fiction novel” (“Inverted Realism” 44).

24. The narrator of Bruce Sterling’s short story “Dori Bangs” (1989) states such a purpose plainly: “Today I made this white paper dream to cover the holes they left” (670). Yuniór, too, answers the call of those “páginas en blanco.”

25. See Job 1:13-19. A contemporary incarnation of this trope enjoys some prominence in the slasher film.

26. I see no need to speculate about the extent to which Yuniór, a Rutgers graduate who appears to have become a member of the Modern Language Association (299), may be aware or appreciative of reader-response criticism. Nevertheless, he shows a modern understanding of the limits of any author’s control over the reception of his work, and he seems to embrace this inevitability in his own manner of writing.

27. For a more specific example of what I am suggesting, we could consider a moment we might deem an “interpretative crux” in some narratives that here indicates the narrator’s own desire to leave the details undecidable: “I wish I could say different but I’ve got it right here on tape. La Inca told you [Beli] you had to leave the country and you laughed” (160). Has Yuniór in fact conducted a spoken interview with La Inca? Or is he simply metaphorically and self-referentially pointing to his own narrative construct as the new *record* of truth, an account as trustworthy as any piece of hard documentary evidence? Either way, the audience must supply the missing piece of the story: Yuniór makes it clear that we must in some sense meet him halfway.

28. It has proved difficult to banish the spectre of Todorov’s approach to the fantastic, perhaps because it invariably seems so applicable. Indeed, Yuniór’s constant equivocation about whether or not certain events involve an element of the supernatural calls to mind Todorov’s conception of fantasy as hesitation. We get the sense, however, that Yuniór is less concerned with the possible existence of the marvelous, preferring instead to remark on the simple fact that some people employ the lens of the supernatural in order to help make sense of such events as the reign of Trujillo: “Most of the folks you speak to prefer the story with a supernatural twist” (243). Use the realistic lens if you want, Yuniór seems to say, or the fantastic if you prefer. In the end, Yuniór himself tends to go for the combination that runs through *Oscar Wao*, the lens of fiction and the lens of genre: “But hey, it’s only a story, with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd could love” (246).

29. Ellik and Evans summarize the powers of the Lens of Arisia as follows: “A lenticular quasi-living instrument of telepathy and other extra-sensory powers, worn by the elite officers (Lensmen) of the Galactic Patrol. It enables Lensmen to communicate with any form of sentient life, and to interpret any message no matter how encoded” (118).

30. Peter Sanderson explains the role of the Watcher in the original *Fantastic Four* comics: “Despite his great power he was forbidden by the laws of his race from aiding the Fantastic Four directly, but nevertheless the Watcher repeatedly warned them of perils and guided them to the means of combating them” (29).

31. By “sole controlling intelligence,” I also mean that Yuniór self-reflexively makes a point of claiming to be the author of the novel (6). Díaz appears to agree with my reading of Yuniór as the singular, omnipresent narrator in an interview with *LAist*; when

asked how hard it was for him “to get into the female subjectivity, to view things from the perspective of Lola, Belicia, La Inka [sic],” he responded:

One of the good things is that I wasn't trying to direct it, it was all being filtered through Yuniór's voice. What I was happiest with, even though these women are being filtered through this aberrant, weirdly masculine, polymathic voice, what I wanted to get across was the sense that you were encountering the female subjectivity despite all this white noise from Yuniór. That a voice like Yuniór could, without losing itself, render what it's like to be around these kinds of women. (Meathrell and Rodriguez)

Rather interestingly, however, “Wildwood” was also published as a stand-alone short story in the 11 June 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, shortly before the publication of the novel. It seems less clear to what extent Yuniór's stamp would persist in this context.

32. Yuniór's narration at times seems much like Marcel's in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), which Genette describes in the original *Narrative Discourse* as follows: “the narrative in the *Recherche* constantly practices what we have christened the pseudo-diegetic: that is, a narrative second in its origin is immediately brought to the first level and taken charge of, whatever its source might be, by the narrator-hero” (240). The essential difference between Yuniór and Marcel, however, is that the commandeered “sources” of the former often appear to derive from a heterodiegetic location.

33. I may use the term “ring composition” more lightly than I should. For a much fuller treatment of this pattern in literature from Antiquity to *Tristram Shandy* and beyond, see Douglas, especially her final statements on ring composition and its complex relationship to the postmodern resistance to closure (142 ff).

34. For example, I realize that I have said almost nothing about the use of the Spanish language in the novel, and I would account for this omission by noting that one could certainly write another essay (or four) on each of the discourses Díaz includes. In a sense, Spanish becomes another kind of “local” discourse like science fiction: Yuniór slips into obscure Spanish slang whenever he deems it appropriate, just as he gazes through the lens of sf whenever it serves his story. Of course, the novel's linguistic code-switching merits examination at much greater length, especially in light of its implications for questions of cultural and national identity. Along these same lines, I have also left largely unexplored the nature of Yuniór's references to Japanese anime as a particular and perhaps significant strand of his otherwise Anglophone science-fictional discourse.

35. I would not go so far as to say, as Willis McNelly does of Kurt Vonnegut, that for Díaz “science fiction become[s] the objective correlative” (195). Nevertheless, further work could be done comparing the respective relationships of high literary authors Vonnegut and Díaz to sf, as well as the respective positions of fictional genre fiends Kilgore Trout and Oscar Wao (or Yuniór) to “literature.” For instance, the title character of Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), while remaining critical of the ability of science fiction authors to “write for sour apples” (19), delivers a famously sympathetic address to them: “‘I love you sons of bitches,’ Eliot said in Milford. ‘You’re all I read any more. You’re the only ones who’ll talk all about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that’ll last for billions of years...’” (18; emphasis in original). Indeed, Tamás Bényei has recently made an argument about Vonnegut that bears comparison with my own: “In *Breakfast of Champions*, as in some other Vonnegut texts, science fiction does function as a metacritical metaphor that allegorically speaks about the critical quandaries around science fiction (including Vonnegut's own position) and figuratively names the ‘post-modern’ difference of Vonnegut's fiction” (67).

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between Junot Díaz's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the genres of science fiction and fantasy, which number among this decidedly mainstream novel's most important subjects. In the end, *Oscar Wao*'s greatest debt to genre fiction lies not in the narrator's presentation of ambiguously supernatural explanations for certain plot events, but in his incessant use of metaphors from sf—such as the Watcher and the Lensman—to describe and understand his own position as narrator-author of the sprawling family saga he relates. The ubiquity and complexity of other genre allusions in the novel prove them to be more than throwaway pop-culture references, testifying to the narrator's deep engagement with the genre as a legitimate "lens" by which to understand human experience. The essay concludes with an attempt to situate this perspective on science fiction in relation to the current trends within the genre, with particular reference to other contemporary "literary" authors such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem.