

2015

Discourse and Narrative: Creating Gender Control in Junot Diaz's the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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J.N. Andrews Honors Program
Andrews University

HONS 497
Honors Thesis

Discourse and Narrative: Creating Gender Control in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

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March 30, 2015

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Abstract

Junot Diaz's Pulitzer-Prize-Winning 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* explores Dominican masculinity through narrator Yunior de Las Casas's portrayal of protagonist Oscar de León's family history. Yunior's perceived virility shapes his understanding of masculinity, which he stresses through the novel's plot and structure.

This analysis considers how Yunior constructs Dominican masculinity through his narrative by marginalizing and emasculating passive characters such as Oscar. I argue that Yunior's narrative closely links definitions of masculinity and power as he strives to dominate passive characters in order to assert his virility as the "best" method for being a Dominican man.

Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a novel that wrestles with the complexities of Dominican gender identity through a multi-faceted narrative involving Caribbean mysticism, high fantasy, science fiction, and Spanish and English slang. Through these multiple lenses, Yunior narrates the stories of multiple members of the de León family and their own interactions with being Dominican. The novel is composed of a series of small narratives that each tell a story about one member of the de León family. I will be focusing primarily on two of the novel's various narratives.

The first of these will be Yunior's narration of Oscar Wao and his frequent attempts to get a girlfriend and have sex. The importance of this narrative is that it establishes the magical realist laws that govern how the plot of the novel will play out. Magical realism is a widely varying genre of literature, but a common motif within it is that, though the novel portrays everything in a real-world setting, the laws of physics are often distorted for magical, spiritual, mystical, or otherwise unexplained reasons. In the case of Yunior's narrative, these magical elements would be what he calls *fukú* and *zafa*. Essentially, both of these forces are what Yunior associates as forms of good and evil. *Fukú* and *zafa* are mysterious, omnipresent, spiritual entities that respectively hurt or help the characters within the novel. As we will see, *fukú* is a curse, and any harm that befalls anyone within the novel is because of *fukú*. *Zafa* is, what Yunior calls, a "counterspell" to *fukú*. *Zafa* is the mysterious force that lifts people out of the curses planted on them by *fukú*. *Fukú* a harmful force, is something that needs to be destroyed and resisted, while *zafa* is the means for facilitating a rebellion against the clutches of *fukú*.

The other narrative of importance to my analysis will be the first-person narrative of Oscar's sister Lola. Unlike Oscar, Yunior portrays Lola as a powerful and independent character unbound by the misogynistic society that surrounds her. Contrary to this, Lola's own portrayal of

the abuse and neglect she receives from to her mother makes her appear weak and marginalized. Lola talks about the beatings that she experienced, her boyfriends that bullied her, and the New Jersey Dominican community that ignored the harm that plagues her. Lola constantly attempts to escape these people, and she ends her story when she moves in with her grandmother in the Dominican Republic.

The current criticism surrounding these two narratives predominantly focus on the seemingly rebellious nature of the narratives. Scholars including Katharine Weese and Kristina Mitchell find that Yuniór's portrayal of a sexually frustrated, and racially alienated, character, such as Oscar, fights against traditional, misogynistic understandings of masculinity and race. Because Yuniór claims that his narrative is an attempt to fight *fukú* through *zafa*, he inevitably supports his characters—despite their inability to follow the standards of masculinity that he creates. Furthermore, it is thought that Yuniór is critical because he seems to leave his misogynistic attitude towards the end of the novel. For Lola, scholars such as Ashley Kunsá only focus on Lola's rebellious attitude in Yuniór's narrative, and how she resists the racist and patriarchal Dominican society that she lives within. Therefore, Lola presents a resistance against this oppressive community through her rebellious and headstrong attitude.

Instead, I find that the seemingly critical stance Yuniór's storytelling takes against gender and race hierarchy is misleading. Furthermore, I would agree that Lola does present a resistant narrative that fights against patriarchy, but that resistance is facilitated through her own defeated voice. Rather than focusing on the rebellious attitude that Yuniór gives her, my assertion is that Lola's own portrayal of her subordinated life paradoxically subverts the norms of society that caused her to be this way in the first place.

There are two ways in which Yunior establishes his structure through narrative. First, Yunior defines his misogynistic understanding that to be a Dominican man means that one has to be physically strong, attractive to women, and very sexually potent. Yunior formulates this definition by juxtaposing his own muscular physique and promiscuous lifestyle against Oscar's unappealing weight and his nerdy interest in fantasy literature. Thus, Yunior creates his narrative for the specific purpose of "supplementing" his definition of Dominican masculinity in the same way Todd W. Reeser explains femininity and masculinity to be supplementary to each other, "Instead of considering the two genders as opposites, one might think in Derrida's terms of femininity as 'supplementary' to masculinity, meaning that masculinity can exist only by virtue of its dependence on femininity" (Reeser 37). Following Reeser's logic, Yunior uses Oscar as this supplement, and defines his own masculinity by contrasting himself against Oscar's passive nerdiness and inability to attract women.

Next, Yunior facilitates the juxtaposition between himself and Oscar by using *fukú* and *zafa* as words that inevitably point to his masculine authority. As we will see, Yunior associates *fukú* with a hyper-masculine attitude that he claims to be proficient in. Furthermore, the misogynistic attitude that defines *fukú* is also associated with a capability to control and dictate other people. Yunior uses the late dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled over the Dominican Republic during the Cold War, as an example of this hierarchical dominance. Since Yunior defines *fukú* by associating it with Trujillo's overpowering masculinity, Yunior's embodiment of this same style of manliness inevitably points to his superiority as a Dominican man.

Fighting *fukú*, Yunior creates the term *zafa* in order to designate a rebellion against the domineering power that oppresses characters like Oscar. Whenever any of the characters get into too much trouble, *zafa* is always there to pull people out of their sticky situations. Because

Yunior praises fukú, he appears to be self-critical towards the misogynistic power hierarchies that he claims to be oppressive. It is this self-criticism that others, like Weese or Mitchell, claim to signify Yunior's antagonism against patriarchy, but a close reading of the text will place this claim into doubt. Although Yunior makes zafa the means of opposing fukú, he still takes ownership over zafa as a concept that he dictates and defines through his narrative. As the narrator of the story, Yunior depicts fukú as an oppressive force, but he makes his narrative itself the "zafa" that liberates his characters.

We will later see how Yunior makes the entirety of his storytelling a giant zafa in itself. For now, it is important to explain that fukú and zafa are terms that assert Yunior's power over his own narrative. The logic here is that words themselves become what facilitate power, Michel Foucault explains how words use sexuality to create a system where people can be regulated and controlled,

Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means first of all that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Secondly, power prescribes an "order" for sex that operates at the same time as a form or intelligibility: sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law. And finally, power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule (Foucault 1076).

In short, Foucault claims that sexuality is not free, but very much controlled and regulated.

Sexuality is defined by certain norms of behavior, and which are created in three steps. First, one must split sexuality into neat binaries that favor certain behaviors over others. Second, these binaries create an understanding for what sexuality is, and all of these binaries are culturally relative. Third, words are created as literal signs to exist as placeholders for the binaries that establish sexual control.

Yunior follows these three steps by using his narrative to assert his superiority. Yunior creates a binary between Dominican and non-Dominican that favors his style of hyper-aggressive masculinity. Yunior defines characters in the novel through these binaries, thereby portraying others as weak. Finally, Yunior uses the words *fukú* and *zafa* as the signifiers of his dominance and control over his narrative. Because *fukú* and *zafa* dictate his narrative, and because he controls these two terms, Yunior's storytelling as whole inevitably points to dictatorial control.

One half of this analysis focuses on how Yunior establishes this dominance through his storytelling. The other half looks at how Lola resists the novel's hierarchies by subverting the terms he uses through her descriptions of the abuse she experiences under her mother. Judith Butler's claim that gender is performative can be used as a point of departure to articulate how Lola subverts Yunior's spiritual rules. Butler defines how gender is performative in her fourth chapter of *Gender Trouble*,

...coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means... In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality (Butler 185).

As a performance that contradicts Yunior's narrative, Lola's oppressed voice ironically subverts Yunior's use of *fukú* and *zafa* by showing that she is oppressed within a supernatural system that originally claims how independent and powerful she is. We should remember that Yunior makes Lola a headstrong character who is exempted from the hierarchical power that *fukú* often places on women. However, Lola depicts herself in a manner that makes her appear objectified and

subordinated to people who constantly abuse and bully her. This becomes important when we see that Lola still follows the same supernatural rules that Yuniór uses to dictate his narrative. Rather than fukú or zafa, Lola describes what she calls a “bruja” feeling that reminds her of the oppression she felt under her mother. We will see that the sensation that Lola describes works in an omnipresent manner that is very similar to Yuniór’s all-powerful description of fukú and zafa. Therefore, Lola’s submission to her mother’s influence indicates an inconsistency within Yuniór’s established law. Lola’s identity as an abused girl is radically different from Yuniór’s understanding of her as a self-sufficient character, but the law that should dictate how much power Lola has remains, curiously, the same. Essentially, Lola’s story shows that the law is impotent in defining her, and regulating her behavior, by making her a victim under the rules that originally made her a dominator. This is not to say that Lola is rebellious against these laws; rather, the novel as a whole can be critical of Yuniór’s narrative by showing slippages within the terms that anchor Yuniór’s authority.

In short, the actions that one commits are not caused, or enacted, because one has a coherent, and stable gender “core” that causes certain behaviors to happen. Butler finds instead that the actions, what she calls performances, one commits will create, and sustain, the definitions of gender that are then perceived to be real. A woman, for example, does not act in a womanly manner because she is born with a body containing breasts and a vagina. Instead, the terms breasts and vagina are inscribed with feminine behaviors that produce what femininity is in itself. This produced femininity appears real, fundamental, and universal, but, in actuality, this definition of gender is relative to what is considered acceptable to the cultural concepts that surround it. Following Butler’s logic, finding what meaning Lola inscribes onto her body, and Beli’s, will help us find what rules govern her conception of the body. Finding what rules dictate

what meaning Lola associates with the body will thus allow us to see how similar her performance of gender is to Yuniór's own actions.

Before we can see how Lola resists *fukú* and *zafa*, we need to see how Yuniór structures his narrative through these two terms. The first part of this procedure involves seeing how he creates the binary between himself and Oscar that funds his conception of masculinity. Yuniór does this by narrating the difficulty that Oscar has in attracting the opposite sex while explaining that this inability of his is something that makes him deficient and un-Dominican, "Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am. It didn't matter what he said. Who the hell, I ask you, had ever met a Domo like him?" (180). As Oscar is insulted and accused of not being Dominican in Spanish, he replies to the jeers in English. This suggests a linguistic divide between himself and Yuniór's Dominican friends. Un-Dominican even in speech, Oscar is made an outsider is ridiculed by his male peers and disregarded by women for his nerdiness. Thus, Oscar's inability to thrive under Yuniór's norm of virility causes him to deal with a severe lack of agency and an insecurity that causes him to be submissive around Yuniór. Here we can already see how Yuniór makes himself superior by portraying Oscar as inferior. Because Oscar cannot attract girls, other Dominican men jeer and berate him. We will also see that Oscar's submissiveness is juxtaposed against Yuniór's virile dominance in a way that praises a promiscuous and domineering lifestyle as the best way to be a man. Through these binary distinctions, Yuniór begins the process of asserting his authority over the characters within his narrative. Before *fukú* and *zafa* become the terms that facilitate his control, Yuniór defines the masculinity he associates with *fukú* by first oppressing Oscar.

Yuniór also associates this identity with being properly Dominican, giving him even more leverage over Oscar as a man. Here we see Yuniór explain what is and is not Dominican to

him, “And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)” (11). The way Yunior uses the word “un-Dominican” here establishes a binary between being Dominican and un-Dominican. Yunior uses Oscar to depict the “un-Dominican” as a way of supplementing his own definition of being Dominican: as Yunior is excessively virile, Oscar is excessively not so. This adds another component to this definition of masculinity: not only does being passive make you un-manly, it also makes you un-Dominican because Dominicans are supposed to be excessively virile. Yunior solidifies this definition by describing Trujillo as the ultimate embodiment of masculinity and Dominican-ness. We will also see later on that Trujillo is not simply there to act as an embodiment of hyper-masculinity.

For now, Yunior continues to assert this binary distinction between his own Dominican-ness and Oscar’s lack of such qualities to define his style of masculinity. Oscar is only tormented more when Yunior forces him to jog and lose weight. Yunior’s choice to assist Oscar is tinged with disdain and his desire for dominance as he makes himself the object of admiration while Oscar is subjected to insults regarding his weight,

Goes to show you: O really did look up to me. No one else could have gotten him to do that...I can’t lie: first couple of times I almost laughed, seeing him huffing down George Street, those ashy black knees of his a-shaking. Keeping his head down so he wouldn’t have to hear or see all the reactions (176-177).

The phrase “no one else” shows how Yunior’s self-comparison not only makes him dominant over Oscar, but over everyone else as well. There is almost a hint of admiration in Yunior’s tone that ultimately makes him the singular influence great enough to make Oscar do the seemingly impossible. We see then how Oscar’s oppression inevitably leads to Yunior’s superiority as the ideal that Oscar must follow. Yunior depicts Oscar in a losing struggle against his own weight that makes him even more alienated than before. Instead of acquiring praise for

attempting to conform to the norm of virility by losing weight to attract girls, Oscar is just oppressed further by making his unintentional deviance from the norm more obvious. Oscar's inability to escape ridicule victimizes him in a way that shows how his passivity inevitably feeds Yuniór's dominant, aggressive attitude. Yuniór forcefully uses the binary distinction between his own attractive physique and Oscar's homely appearance, to portray what is, and is not, favored as the superior possessor of masculine power.

Despite his inability to embody Yuniór's power by being attractive, Oscar finally captures the attention of a desirable girl, cleans himself up, and starts exercising. Yet Yuniór continues his emasculation of Oscar by showing his ability to attract multiple girls at once,

I should have been happy for Wao, I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action? Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me, who had pussy coming out my ears? (185).

Yuniór's highly misogynistic and arrogant language expresses his ease in attracting girls, of which he is very proud of. The word "scooped" especially shows this, as he degrades women to only being "pussies" that he can simply "pick up" at a party. Not only does Yuniór flaunt his exceptional sex drive, but his misogynistic language also expresses an emotional independence from women that Oscar does not have. Therefore, Yuniór adds another dimension to his sexual norm by requiring an emotional distance from women.

Yuniór expresses this misogyny by revealing the tension between his derogatory understanding of Jenni, and Oscar's poetic affection for her. Jenni is a girl who Oscar becomes close to, but more importantly, who scorns Yuniór after he tries to hit on her. Jenni literally laughs at Yuniór's attempts to talk to her, but surprisingly acts interested in Oscar. This love triangle is actually one instance where Oscar might have a better chance at getting a girl than Yuniór does. Even though Oscar never succeeds in forming anything meaningful between

himself and Jenni, Yuniór is still very bitter about being rejected by a girl who talks to Oscar. By contrasting his cold treatment of Jenni with Oscar's smitten love, Yuniór shows the tenderness that causes Oscar to eventually attempt suicide, "She started walking away and Oscar yelled out superloud, We'll talk anon!...I waved him over. So how'd it go, Romeo? He looked down at his hands. I think I may be in love. How can you be in love? You just met the bitch. Don't call her a bitch, he said darkly" (183). Oscar's affectionate and dramatic use of "anon," along with his admission of falling in love, shows his immediate closeness to women that Oscar bears.

Furthermore, Oscar's words expose his intentions are not entirely sexual—considering that he only asks Jenni to talk. Oscar's affection for only Jenni, paired with his need for love more than sex shows his regard for women that Yuniór understands to be deviant. Yuniór thus marginalizes Oscar's deviance through victimization, and by revealing his emotional weakness. As we have shown earlier, Yuniór's conception of masculinity requires that emotional sentimentality and tenderness are not permitted for a proper performance of masculinity. For Oscar not to be marginalized, he would have to objectify women the same way that Yuniór does so frequently. Instead, Oscar waxes poetic and wears his emotional vulnerability on his sleeve. Because he is so affectionate towards other women, Oscar cannot inherit the same aggressive associations with fukú that make characters like Trujillo so powerful.

We have seen that Yuniór defines masculinity through his own performance of aggression and misogyny. Next it is important to see how Yuniór links fukú to the masculinity that he defines by oppressing Oscar's nerdiness. What Yuniór needs to do first is separate fukú from any concept that could compete with the core of masculinity that he finds to be so vital. First, Yuniór achieves this by separating fukú and zafa from traditional discourses of history common throughout the United States. In other words, history is not authoritative because it is

the recorded events of the past. Instead, history is authoritative because fukú decided what happened within it. Thus, Yuniór sets out to replace traditional accounts of Western history with the authority he provides through fukú. To do this, Yuniór associates the term fukú with a vague, and conversational tone that resists the precise language that characterizes typical descriptions of Western history,

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles (1).

Opening with the phrase, “They say,” Yuniór establishes the irrationality with which the fukú must be described. Rather than providing a traditionally historical account for such a vital piece to his own narrative, Yuniór’s reliance on verbal hearsay and mystical language subverts the authority of history by making it seem more like a rumor than authoritative fact. In essence, this lends a mysterious tone to fukú that helps assert the spiritual components that separate it from the precise historical and scientific discourses that typically underly authoritative understandings of the past.

By making his understanding of fukú sound like a rumor or gossip, Yuniór separates his narrative from the heightened precision typically associated with Western portrayals of history. Using fukú, Yuniór creates an alternate understanding of history that distances his narrative from hegemonic Western discourse. By inserting doubt about fukú from the very beginning (while hinging the outcome of Cold War international history upon it soon after), Yuniór’s portrayal of fukú creates a somewhat paradoxical power hierarchy where it can be at once questioned and remaining decidedly omnipresent against a Western-dominated historical context.

Instead of remaining a participant within the narrative, fukú becomes the driving force behind the novel’s historical setting, “Where in coñazo do you think the so-called Curse of the

Kennedys comes from? How about Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam?” (4). Yuniór’s use of the Spanish slang word “coñazo” here continues the trend of narrative irrationality and disbelief started in his description of fukú. Rather than appearing authoritative and assertive, Yuniór’s use of the second-person tense—paired with his use of vulgar Spanish slang—makes his questioning of history seem particularly unofficial and conversational. Yuniór’s tone is particularly un-historical and un-scientific because he takes authority through the lack of rigor within his alternative understanding to history. If traditional history needs to be defined through rigorous understandings of the past where everything is categorized, catalogued, and charted, then Yuniór’s imprecise language resists any need to explain his history in a similarly believable way.

It would be accurate to argue that Yuniór makes fukú because it is so unbelievable. Yuniór makes this very claim himself when he writes, “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (5). It is clear that Yuniór does not care if the reader believes fukú is real. Yuniór is careful to call history a “belief” that the reader holds. His association between history and belief separates it from fact, and therefore, is something that can be interpreted and warped. Furthermore, Yuniór removes his narrative from the authority of the reader as he asserts that his belief in his history is what is relevant to the narrative. Anything that the reader brings to the table that can contest the authority of fukú is therefore ignored. Yuniór also does not bother to explain why fukú needs to be believed, as that would reveal that he really holds himself accountable to the reader’s belief in the narrative. Instead, fukú becomes its own justification without regard for any outside factors aside from itself. By doing this, Yuniór makes fukú the

authority that presides over his narrative as he uses imprecise and mysterious language to assert his disregard any other authorities that might compete with Yuniór's claims.

Another important detail regarding his account of history is that Yuniór's language becomes increasingly more precise and thorough the moment he describes how fukú becomes a source of power and control,

It might interest you that just as the U.S. was ramping up its involvement in Vietnam, LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965)...What do you think these soldiers, technicians, and spooks carried with them, in their rucks, in their suitcases, in their shirt pockets, on the hair inside their nostrils, caked up around their shoes? Just a little gift from my people to America, a small repayment for an unjust war. That's right, folks. Fukú" (Diaz 4).

Replacing Yuniór's imprecise description of fukú's origins, his language suddenly becomes highly rigorous in its vindictiveness. Yuniór is careful to record dates for his history, and thoroughly works his way through very intimate spaces within the American military's physical presence inside the Dominican Republic during the Cold War. Yuniór portrays fukú in tiny, intimate, spaces such as rucks, nostrils and shirt pockets. This gives fukú an almost medically invasive authority that works its way into very small and specific spaces. Therefore, fukú does not just defy the authority of history. Fukú also has an omnipresent quality that allows it to transcend the boundaries of physics and space-time. This is yet another layer of authority that fukú subverts as it systematically attempts to remove any possible concept or idea that could show it to be false. To do this, Yuniór continues to assert that fukú works and has power simply because it is the way it is.

After his initial authoritative description of fukú, Yuniór continues to flesh out his control over this term by explaining it through various sci-fi and fantasy tropes. First, Yuniór links fukú with these genres by comparing it to superhero villains, such as Darkseid from the D.C. Comics franchise, and the lore of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, "...like Darkseid's Omega Effect,

like Morgoth's bane, no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always- and I mean always-gets its man" (5). Yuniór here links his "fukú-ed" account of history with villains from comic books and fantasy novels, and thus adds another component to his discourse of narrative control. Like his use of casual language before, this mixing of fantasy with history again destabilizes the authority of history as fact. Taking his logic further than merely accepting history as belief, Yuniór actually asserts the authority of fukú through what the reader understands to be fantastical and unreal.

Therefore, it is not just only Yuniór's subversion of authority that might defy his narrative. Along with his disregard for authority, Yuniór creates his own explanations for things, through fantasy and science fiction, to ensure that nothing that he uses to describe fukú actually transcends the boundaries of believability that could challenge his authority. Because the ultimate reality of fukú is described through fantasy characters that are clearly not real, nothing in fukú could be associated with actual reality. This association with fantasy also becomes important when Yuniór describes Trujillo's unrealistically oppressive masculinity that gives him the power to rule over the Dominican Republic. Elaborating on this point as well, Monica Hanna, in her "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," claims,

Yuniór thus stages a narrative resistance in his recounting of history. He refuses to allow the subsuming of elements of history deemed irrelevant to the national story, instead rescuing them from oblivion and tracing an alternative trajectory and understanding of history from the fragments he collects and imagines (Hanna 505).

Therefore, by blurring the lines between history and fantasy, Yuniór is able to establish each as somewhat fictional. Since Yuniór can take free narrative reign over his use of fantasy and comic books, he can also control history by mixing it with the fantasy genres. This also synergizes well with the magical realist elements of fukú and zafa, for both of these terms need

to be distanced from the reader's conception of reality. Yunior's association between fukú and fantasy literature also breaks the boundaries between what is real and un-real in a magical realist way that destabilizes the reader's understanding of a stable reality not dictated by fukú.

Aside from subverting the authority of traditional Western discourses such as history or the laws of physics, Yunior continues to take authority over fukú and zafa by linking Trujillo with the overwhelming power that fukú has. For example, we see how the thoroughness of Trujillo's control makes it similar to the oppressive omnipresence of fukú,

If you think the average Dominican guy's bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse. Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass; of the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was) (217).

Yunior's somewhat humorous use of his invented word "culocracy" shows how central sex is to the regime, for its invasiveness and control is motivated by Trujillo's rampant desire for the "procurement of ass." Therefore, if Oscar has no power due to his inability to have sex with women, Trujillo, oppositely, exists as a paragon of excessive sexual potency. In the same way that fukú thoroughly oppresses everyone at all times, Trujillo's regime is also associated with a similar kind of omnipresent authority. Because his sexual potency is considered the epitome of fukú, Yunior collectively associates Trujillo and fukú with the ability to be ludicrously promiscuous.

This obsession with sexuality, and Trujillo's control through it, seems to be concurrent with contemporary sociological understandings of what Latino masculinity in the United States strives for as Hernan Ramirez and Edward Flores in their "Latino Masculinities in the Post-911 Era" explain,

Three activities form the core of male Latino gang life, or *deviant barrio masculinity*: substance abuse, gang violence, and extramarital affairs....As one man said, 'My role

model was a gang member, all tattoos, coming out of prison, being buff, having all kinds of women, that's what I wanted to grow up to be'" (Ramirez and Flores 37).

Driven by uncontrollable sexual appetite and gratification, Trujillo's capability to have numerous affairs verges on being superhuman to those living within the regime. By using Trujillo and Oscar as opposite poles on his spectrum of masculinity (where Trujillo is excessively virile while Oscar is excessively not so), Yuniór asserts his manliness by contrasting his own promiscuity against Oscar's supposedly un-Dominican inability to find love. Yuniór asserts the same style of misogynistic power as Trujillo by having sex with any woman he wants, and therefore associates himself with the dictator's political power. Therefore, a problem with fukú is that it could potentially give Trujillo more authority than Yuniór. Because Trujillo is the ultimate embodiment of fukú's power, Yuniór must also be admitting that his authority does not exceed the Dominican dictator's power.

Although this might seem to be the case at first, Yuniór regains his authority by fighting fukú with the mysterious power of zafa. The first mention of zafa comes early on as Yuniór ontologically links his narrative with it, "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). As yet another element to Yuniór's narrative structure, this added dimension to the fukú mysticism is what allows him to eventually take control of the supernatural elements of the narrative. Even looking at his language momentarily, the possessiveness with which Yuniór regards the zafa, and his narrative, can be seen. Using the singular possessive pronoun "my" with his counterspell, Yuniór asserts his ownership over the supernatural elements of his plot. Complicating his possession of zafa even more, Yuniór's language also destabilizes the power of the supernatural by showing how he exists outside of the text. Notice that Yuniór becomes self-conscious that he is writing a narrative the moment he acknowledges his ownership over what he says. In other words, the only thing that could

potentially be outside the boundaries of fukú and zafa is Yunior himself. Yunior recognizes that he uses the narrative to express how he owns and dictates it. This sentence breaks the fourth wall as Yunior makes the actual creation of the narrative a part of the narrative itself. In effect, he portrays himself as the only element of this discourse existing outside of history.

Yunior systematically ensures that fukú and zafa exist beyond any understanding of reality that could contest it. Fukú and zafa exist beyond the grasp of history by using language that subverts the factuality of history. The two terms cannot be explained with the laws of physics because they are spiritual, fantastical, and omnipresent terms that cannot be categorized with science. Finally, Yunior does eventually point to something that could potentially exist beyond the authority of fukú and zafa, but Yunior himself is the one who can do this by being the narrator of the story. By subverting the authority of anything that could exist outside the boundaries of his story, Yunior establishes the rules that give him authority over the terms that dictate the exposition of the text.

Considering how thorough he has been in asserting his authority over any concept potentially competing with fukú or zafa, Yunior shows a surprising revision in his language by admitting that his insatiable virility has only distanced him from Lola, the only girl that he might have possibly loved. Katherine Weese, in her article “‘Tu no Ere Nada de Dominicano’: Unnatural Narration and De-Naturalizing Gender Constructs in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” claims that this recognition in Yunior is a sign of his attempt to break with hegemonic discourses of masculinity, “His self-conscious language frequently undermines his own adherence to conventions of traditional Dominican masculinity, and he is certainly, in his narration, hyper-aware of his own hyper-masculinity as well...” (Weese 93). While Weese is correct that Yunior is aware of his own masculinity and tries to reform it, this reformation still

points to his dominance over his narrative. Because Yuniór can revise his behavior, and effectively become independent from the misogyny that he creates, he shows how he transcends the very definitions that pointed to his superiority in the first place. In other words, Yuniór is essentially showing how he is better than *fukú* and *zafa*, even if these two terms define and rationalize his entire narrative. This returns to our earlier assertions that Yuniór places himself outside the boundaries of his narrative by revealing his self-aware admission that he writes, and therefore owns, the story. By writing *fukú* and by leaving its influence behind himself, Yuniór shows that he can paradoxically exist beyond the curse that he claims is omnipresent.

Rather than subverting himself, Yuniór's acceptance of Oscar's respectful tone towards women-paired with his more gentle demeanor-remains as another method of asserting his dominance:

Took ten years to the day, went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while-no Lola, no me, no nothing-until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win....I don't run around after girls anymore. Not much anyway....These days I write a lot. From can't see in the morning to can't see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man (Diaz 325, 326).

Realizing that his uncontrolled sex drive does not work in his best interest, Yuniór changes and even uses competitive language to admit that Oscar has won. By shifting his conception of masculinity towards a more moderate attitude inspired by Oscar, Yuniór reveals how his conception of gender is not statically rooted in his aggressive attitude of his past. Instead, Yuniór strategically shifts his attitude to show how his definition of gender is, as Judith Butler describes it in her *Gender Trouble* "...a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler 15). Butler finds, as Foucault does with sexuality, that gender is not

rooted in a concrete, and universal, understanding of the body. Instead, definitions of gender are relative to the cultural and historical contexts in which they are performed. Rather than being defined by virility alone, Yuniór shows a convergence here between it and Oscar's more compassionate personality to create a new gender norm.

Something to note is how Yuniór still calls Oscar "Wao" here, despite softening his overtly aggressive behavior. The recurrence of this insulting nick-name shows the disrespect that Yuniór still bears for Oscar despite learning to adapt Oscar's love of writing and less promiscuous nature in his own life. Yuniór shows here how discourses can alter themselves through an interaction with those that are deviant to them. In creating two different perspectives on sexuality, one virile and one affectionate and caring, Yuniór shows how methods of control can be continued through a hybridization between the two modes that were previously considered separate. Still disregarding Oscar as inferior through his continuing distinction of him as only "Wao," Yuniór shows that even after adopting previously deviant concepts into his identity, he can still maintain and assert dominance that oppresses Oscar.

Rather than simply oppressing others continuously, Yuniór's evolution towards being more gentle and compassionate incorporates Oscar's style of masculinity as another expression of Yuniór's dominance. It would not be enough to say that Yuniór makes himself dominant by oppressing other through his misogyny. Beyond this, Yuniór expresses his superiority by also showing that he can be very capable in living a lifestyle that resists his previous aggression. Essentially, Yuniór is having his cake and eating it too: although he is like Trujillo by having fukú's masculine power, he, unlike Trujillo, can leave the negative connotations of the concept begin. The most important point about Yuniór's narrative then, is that Yuniór himself is the ultimate authority of the story. Fukú and zafa, although powerful entities in their own right, they

cannot rigidly define Yunion the same way they do for the other characters within the novel. Transcending even the power of fukú and zafa, Yunion ultimately makes himself the only character that can exist beyond the authority of the terms that govern his narrative.

Now that we have seen how he takes control over his narrative, we can move on to how Lola's storytelling resists the hierarchy of power that Yunion establishes through fukú and zafa. To begin, Yunion is never mentioned in the novel, and Lola does not express any oppression due to his presence. Instead, Lola's voice is almost entirely stifled by her mother, Beli, and the various men that she comes in contact with. Nearly all of her relationships involves some kind of power struggle that inevitably concludes with her submission. For example, Lola's relationship with her mother is highly abusive and violent, but even so, her suffering is still made secondary to that of her mother, "Of course everyone thought I was the worst daughter ever. My tia and our neighbors kept saying, Hija, she's your mother, she's dying, but I wouldn't listen" (59). The somewhat patronizing term of "Hija" here shows the lack of concern her Dominican community has for Lola in comparison with her mother. Translated into English as "daughter," Lola is not considered by her community to be someone worth naming. Although "Hija" could be interpreted as an endearing nickname, it also shows how the community around her is either somehow ignorant or complicit with the abuse that Lola experiences from Beli. Instead of faulting Beli for mistreating Lola, the Dominican community would rather condemn Lola for being a bad daughter. If Lola has any agency over her own identity, it must be in spite of apathetic treatment she finds from those around her. Beli is placed in a position of power over Lola by the Dominican community surrounding them. Therefore any abuse against Lola will generally be ignored. The lack of empathy that Lola is subjected to seems similar to the emotional distance that Yunion creates between himself and women, but instead of being called a

“bitch” or a “slut,” Lola is labelled as a daughter. Similar to how Yuniór berates Oscar for his sentimental treatment of Jenni, the Dominican community around Lola encourage her to tough out, rather than talk about, the abuse she experiences from Beli. We can see then, that the hierarchy of power facilitated between Beli and Lola is similar to the superiority that Yuniór takes over Oscar. From the outset, we see the similarities between Yuniór’s aggression towards Oscar, and Beli’s abuse of Lola. But rather than making Lola subject to the same rules that govern Yuniór’s text, the similarities between both narratives will eventually show how Lola resists the laws of *fukú* and *zafa* by following the same rules that define them.

It is clear that Lola’s portrayal of herself is one in which she is victimized and startlingly submissive in comparison to Yuniór’s description of her as an independent woman unbounded by the gender constraints that plague Oscar. At first glance, it would thus be easy to view Lola’s narrative as one that follows the same gender hierarchies that Yuniór uses to establish his form of dominant masculinity. Lola seems to embody the same marginalized position that any normal woman would have in Yuniór’s narrative, and thus, would appear to embody the same regulations of gender that she should have been an exception from. On the other hand, this interpretation risks ignoring how Lola’s marginalized voice paradoxically resists the binary division that Yuniór establishes between her and Oscar by using the laws of *fukú* against itself.

Although his narrative mostly focuses on the differences between himself and Oscar, Yuniór spends a good amount of time carefully describing Lola’s self-sufficient and independent identity. Long before Yuniór even reveals that he is the narrator of the story, he establishes a binary division between his interpretations of Lola’s rebelliously “masculine” attitude against Oscar’s more passive, and therefore marginalized, behavior. Lola is important because Yuniór places her expression of empowered masculinity in closest proximity to Oscar’s passive,

feminine weakness. Thus, Lola's independence and Oscar's inferiority are closely linked with one another in a way that begins to establish the binary divisions of masculinity and femininity that eventually materialize into the terms *fukú* and *zafa*.

One instance of the division that separates Oscar from Lola is in the first chapter of the book as Lola exerts a powerful independence that contrasts Oscar's pathetic, unkempt appearance,

[Lola] turned into one of those tough Jersey dominicanas, a long-distance runner who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you without a speck of *vergüenza*. . . . Oscar, Lola warned repeatedly, you're going to die a virgin unless you start *changing*. . . . Cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise. And get rid of those porn magazines. They're disgusting, they bother Mami, and they'll never get you a date. (25)

The most important detail to see with this comparison is the authoritative tone that Lola uses to reveal Oscar's unattractiveness. First, Yuniór portrays Lola as an empowered character because she can so confidently emasculate men. The use of the word "bitches" really asserts this, as Lola is capable of associating men with a traditionally effeminizing word that makes her more masculine and authoritative than the other men around her. Lola's dominant behavior over other people, regardless of their gender, makes her independent from the definition provided by *fukú* and *zafa* that typically insists that women be marginalized. As discussed, Both Yuniór and Trujillo use women as the passive commodities by which they can measure their masculinities, but Lola's headstrong behavior frees her from these boundaries by doing things such as calling men bitches.

This leads us back to Lola's own dominance by showing how she ironically flips the power hierarchy that Yuniór uses to place himself over the women he has sex with. The word "bitch" homogenizes women into a broad category of sex objects that Yuniór can have in large quantities. Lola flips this hierarchy by performing an act of misogynistic power against men

themselves, and thus destabilizes the gender roots that support Yuniór's disregard for women. Lola's performance of the same misogynistic acts that Yuniór commits is one way that we can see the imperfections within his narrative. Fukú and zafa should insist that men dominate over women, but Lola's actions show that this is not the case. Unlike the "bitches" that he can take advantage of, Yuniór portrays Lola in a way that makes her free from the oppression of fukú that constantly affects Oscar. Because Lola acts in a masculine manner that sets her apart from other typical women, she follows the rules of fukú that dictate that being masculine is the same as being powerful.

Because Lola can successfully associate men with the same effeminizing term that Yuniór uses to describe his ownership over women, she is also considered independent, strong, and capable. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Lola can preside over and command Oscar with such decisive authority. Similar to a drill sergeant, Lola literally orders Oscar around by telling him what he should be doing in order to be a man. Not only acting, according to Yuniór, in a masculine manner that gives her the power to be independent, Lola takes this a step further by actually instructing other men, in this case Oscar, on how to act like a man. This places Lola in the position of power, and makes her the enforcer of the fukú law that Oscar fails to uphold by being so nerdy or by having no backbone. Not only ordering him around, Lola is the first person within Yuniór's narrative to teach Oscar how to be a man. Like Yuniór after her, Lola's commands enforce a need to change Oscar by making him exercise, cutting his hair, throwing away his pornography, etc., and these enforced changes attempt to make Oscar assertive and sexually attractive in a way that is "typical" for Dominican men. This should seem similar to Yuniór's attempts at getting Oscar to run and lose weight. Not only does Yuniór define himself by referring to Oscar's nerdiness, Lola is also juxtaposed against Oscar in a way that

reveals her power and independence. Again, this goes back to Yuniior's narrative, because Lola performs in the same way that Yuniior does when she tells Oscar what to do in order to be a man. Because Lola follows this same dominant performance of telling Oscar what to do, she again finds herself free from oppression in Yuniior's narrative. The main point here is that Yuniior's narrative requires that Lola be independent and headstrong. Because she needs to be portrayed in such an empowered way, Yuniior needs to portray her performance of gender in a way that is masculine. Yuniior makes his body masculine as he makes his muscular body the source of his power and attractiveness, and Lola also asserts this by forcing Oscar to change how he looks. Essentially, both find power in the body, and consider it necessary to have a physique that reflects the power of being a man.

Where Yuniior finds power in his weight-lifter physique, Lola also finds power in Beli's big breasts. Both Lola and Yuniior use physiological means to describe authority, but the main differentiation between the two is that Lola sees this authority in someone else while Yuniior sees it in himself. In the second chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, titled "Wildwood," the novel abruptly segues from Yuniior's storytelling about Oscar, Lola, and Beli into Lola's first-person narration about her oppressive relations with her mother. Contrary to Yuniior's portrayal of her as a headstrong woman who behaves in a rebellious and masculine way, Lola describes herself with a heavily marginalized voice that cannot stand up to her mother's abusive parenting. Beginning her narrative, Lola describes the hierarchies between herself and her mother, and compares Beli's (the mother) body against her own:

Your mother's breasts are immensities. One of the wonders of the world. The only ones you've seen that are bigger are in nudie magazines or on really fat ladies....These breasts have always embarrassed you and when you walk in public with her you are always conscious of them.... But for all your similarities, the tides of inheritance have yet to reach your chest. You have only the slightest hint of breast; from most angles you're flat as a board and you're thinking she's going to order you to stop wearing bras again

because they're suffocating your potential breasts, discouraging them from popping out of you. (52)

Lola's description is tinged with anxiety as she is forced to be constantly aware of the inferior breast size she has in comparison to her mother. Lola expresses awe at Beli's breasts by calling them "wonders" (52). First, this expresses Lola's admiration by placing her mother's breasts on a kind of pedestal. Lola inscribes meaning into her mother's chest by making them the indicators of Beli's superiority over her. Whereas Beli is wondrous and powerful from the sheer size of her breasts, Lola feels alienation from her authoritarian mother due to her small chest. Lola indicates that Beli's huge breasts are things that should be inherited, an expectation that she should be able to uphold. Instead, Lola fails to perform this act of having large breasts, and therefore she considers herself inferior to her mother. This is not to say that Beli's breasts, in themselves, are the source of her power over her daughter. Lola is careful to mention that despite the anxiety she feels towards Beli's breasts, her mother still cannot control other people the ways she controls Lola. We can return to Yuniór's narrative momentarily to see how both he and Lola must define their respective conceptions of gender through other people. If Yuniór uses Oscar to highlight his own powerful physique against Oscar's unattractive appearance, then Lola shows the lack in her breast size to indicate her inferiority to her mother.

Something else to keep in mind is that Lola also seems somewhat critical of the authority that Beli has due to her breasts. Although her breasts make Lola feel insecure, she also claims that these same breasts fail to give Beli the same authority over men. Lola mentions that her mother brags about how her father could "never get enough" of Beli's breasts, but she also says that, "*But given the fact that he ran off on her after their third year of marriage, it seemed in the end that he could*" (52). Beli claims that her large breasts give her power over other men, such as her ex-husband, but Lola places this authority into question. It is important to note that Beli feels

the need to brag about the attractiveness she claims to have due to her breasts. The fact that men appreciate Beli's breasts seems to be, for her, an indicator of the sexual desirability necessary for her to attract men. In the same way that Yuniór praises his own body-builder physique as the source for his power to attract women, Beli uses her breasts as the devices by which she can gain power over men. Beli's inaccurate understanding of her breasts remind us that any meaning associated with the body is fabricated. Again, Beli cannot see that there really is no inherent power within the breasts themselves, and this same assertion could be made of Yuniór's body as well. In the same way that meaning is fabricated onto Beli's body, ideas can also be inscribed onto Yuniór's body in a way that would inevitably praise his superiority.

Lola questions the desirability that her mother gets from her chest by showing that her husband could actually get enough of the breasts that, according to her mother, he should not have been able to resist. Beli claims that her breasts were keeping her husband at home, but their eventual failure to actually follow up on this task is telling towards the fabricated nature of Beli's power. Thus, there really is no power fundamentally rooted within the breasts themselves; rather, Lola inscribes this power into her mother's chest by describing it as superior, wonderful, and more desirable in comparison to her own. The act of having large breasts is in itself a performance of a certain feminine style that Lola cannot enact herself. Since Lola does not perform the act of having the breasts that she finds so wondrous, her identity as a woman is associated with anxiety and alienation from the authority she places on her mother. Lola's narrative provides an alternate, more victimized, understanding of a character that, to Yuniór, was highly assertive. But one must ask why this perspective is placed within the novel in the first place. What relation does Lola's narrative have with Yuniór's story and its use of *fukú* and *zafa* to oppress "non-masculine" characters such as Oscar?

The answer to this question is found within the supernatural language that Lola uses in describing the neglect and marginalization she experiences under her mother. Yuniór and Lola's narratives are linked by a common use of magical-realist themes that explain the oppression within their stories through recurring supernatural motifs. For Yuniór, these motifs are *fukú* and *zafa*, while for Lola, it is a "bruja" feeling that she gets whenever she thinks about her mother. We see one of these particular instances when Lola sees a picture of Beli. While Lola is living in the Dominican Republic with her grandmother, her family in the United States send her a photograph depicting a healthy Beli before she gets cancer. Lola describes the chill she gets at looking at her mother in the photograph, and her portrayal of the feeling she gets sounds similar to Yuniór's description of *fukú*.

Before looking at this quote itself, it is important to remember that the most important element of Yuniór's description of *fukú* is the overt thoroughness with which it exerts its oppressive dominance over the characters within the novel. By juxtaposing Yuniór's description of *fukú* against Lola's "bruja" feeling, it becomes apparent that both use the supernatural to tell their respective stories. Yuniór claims that "Everybody in Santo Domingo has a *fukú* story knocking around in their family," and that it "always—and I mean always—gets its man," (5). If there is anything in Yuniór's description of *fukú*, it would be how very thorough, if not universal, the curse is at affecting everyone, whether they are Dominican or not. According to Yuniór, it is not just that certain people are affected by *fukú*, it is that everyone in Santo Domingo has some interaction with the curse. Yuniór uses the word "always" to show that if one is targeted by *fukú*, it is impossible to escape. Finally, Yuniór brings *fukú* to the reader by claiming that it will even get the second-person "you" (the reader he is addressing). In short, *fukú* has an omnipresent nature that allows it to break the borders of space, time, and even the

boundaries of the novel itself. Nothing is safe from the grasp of fukú as it works its way into everyone's lives.

Now that we have established fukú's omnipresent nature, we can return to Lola's narrative in order to see how her "bruja" feeling is similar to Yunior's description of fukú. The first thing to consider is that this sensation that Lola describes comes from the inevitability that Lola will no longer have to live under her mother's oppression. Lola describes this feeling as a premonition for things to change, that something about the victimized state that she is currently in will no longer exist in the future. Lola first gets this feeling when she is closest to the location on which she places her mother's authority: the breasts. Beli commands Lola to touch her mother's breasts, and it is at that moment that Lola begins to feel a change,

Your mom is rough in all things but this time she is gentle. You did not think her capable of it....At first all you feel is the heat of her and the density of the tissue...A knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot. And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change (53).

Touching the cancerous lump in Beli's breast, Lola literally, and figuratively, gets the feeling for what will end the oppressive relationship that she has with her mother. Literally, she feels it, because she places her mother's cancer in her hand. Figuratively she feels it because she gets the bruja feel that indicates this coming change. In these two ways of literal and figurative feeling, Lola actually touches the loss of authority that Beli is about to experience due to having her breasts removed.

Soon after Lola gets this feeling for the first time, we see Beli begin to lose her authority after her mastectomy. Beli and Lola have a fight after the all-important breasts are removed, and Beli acts uncharacteristically sentimental and soft,

She would hit us anywhere, in front of anyone, always free with the chanclas and the correa, but now with her cancer there's not much she can do anymore. The last time she

tried to whale on me it was because of my hair, but instead of cringing or running I punched her hand...But she just stood there shaking, in her stupid wig and her stupid bata, with two huge foam prostheses in her bra, the smell of burning wig all around us. I almost felt sorry for her. This is how you treat your mother? She cried (55).

With her breasts gone, Beli suddenly becomes a pathetic-looking woman who now complains about her own victimization to Lola's expressions of violence. Lola draws special attention to the Beli's inauthentic appearance by pointing out the stupidity of Beli's wig, her bata (Spanish for a smock), and the fakeness of her breasts. Since the source of her power has been the rare proportions of her body, losing these various physical traits inevitably causes Beli to lose her authority in relation to Lola. This is not to say that these breasts actually have power within them, because Beli loses her authority after her mastectomy. Rather, Beli's sudden loss of power merely reveals the law that was underlying her authority all along: that the bruja feeling is really the same independence she had under Yuniór's narrative governed by fukú and zafa. Because the bruja feeling indicates Lola's independence from Beli, we can already begin to see the parallels between it and Yuniór's description of fukú. In the narrative dictated by fukú, Lola is free to emasculate and order other men around, and the bruja feeling is an indicator of this law popping through Beli's original authoritarian position over her daughter.

But while Lola's independence is one quality that the Bruja feeling and fukú share, what is also important is that both follow the fantastical, magical realist laws that separate them from the constraints of space and time. One instance showing this is when Lola gets a post-card from her family in the United States as she is living in the Dominican Republic. Lola looks at her mother in the photo, and has the same bruja feeling that she has before.

My mother's not wearing her fakies in it; she looks so thin I don't even recognize her. Just know that I would die for you, she told me the last time we talked. And before I could say anything she hung up. But that's not what I wanted to tell you. It's about that crazy feeling that started this whole mess, the bruja feeling that comes singing out of my bones, that takes hold of me the way blood seizes cotton. The feeling that tells me that

everything in my life is about to change. It's come back. Just the other day I woke up from all these dreams and it was there, pulsing inside of me. (72)

Like we saw earlier with *fukú*, the feeling that Lola also describes, in concurrent omnipresent fashion, breaches the boundaries of space and time that paradoxically affects Lola in a very personal and physiological manner.

First, we need to observe how the feeling breaks through time and space. The feeling that Lola gets arises with a series of different phenomena that occur in different moments of time and various locations of physical space. Lola describes seeing her mother (currently in the United States) in a picture, remembering a call they shared in the past, and thinking about unknown changes that might occur to her in the future. Lola remembers her mother in various different moments in space-time, but her mother's influence still materializes into the feeling that she feels at the current instance of time that she is in. Paradoxically, Lola sees her mother in various planes of time and space, but the aftershocks of Beli's presence occur in the present moment that Lola narrates. Like the *fukú* that Yuniór describes earlier, the feeling that signifies Beli's influence of Lola in the current moment breaks beyond the boundaries of physics and becomes an omnipresent force that affects Lola in the one moment that she currently narrates.

Second, we see that these thoughts, sprinkled throughout various moments in space-time, result in feelings that are deeply personal, physiological, and very in-the-moment. The call between the two involves a very personal conversation where Beli admits loving her daughter by saying that she would die for Lola. The *bruja* feeling is described in very physiological terms as it emanates from her bones and seizes Lola like blood in cotton. Like *fukú*, the *bruja* feeling is not only omnipresent, but deeply personal and physiological in nature. As Yuniór threatens his own physical body by claiming that he is strangled by *fukú*, the *bruja* feeling that Lola feels also

affects her in a deeply physiological level by moving through her bones and absorbing her like cotton does blood.

We have established that the bruja feeling, like fukú, is portrayed as an omnipresent force that paradoxically affects the narrator in a specific moment. However, the effect of these similarities on Yuniór's narrative are still not clear. In order to find this clarity, a performative perspective, again, becomes helpful for explaining what Lola's narrative does to Yuniór's story. In short, my point is that the bruja feeling is the term that designates Lola's performance of a concept that was originally created in Yuniór's narrative. Lola's feeling has the same omnipresence, authority, and association with an oppressive character that fukú has, but the depiction of Lola's agency is fundamentally different depending on the narrative. Regardless of the fact that she is following the same laws dictating fukú, Lola depicts herself as a marginalized, oppressed, and victimized character.

By following the same authoritarian principles that Yuniór establishes with fukú Lola simultaneously shows that her identity is still very different even when she uses the same rules to describe her oppression. Lola's victimized performance subverts the laws that Yuniór purports to be stable by revealing their inability to consistently maintain the same identity in either of the narratives in which she is portrayed. We have seen that the bruja feeling is very similar to the supernatural, and omnipresent nature of fukú and zafa. Even if her identity is constructed from the same magical-realist source, Lola's identity is still much more submissive than it is in Yuniór's narrative. What we saw with Beli's breasts before is the same thing we see here with Lola: that the concepts underlying the definition of one's gender is constructed according to the social contexts that surround them. Lola shows that even when the same rules apply to her in her own narrative, her performance of gender can still be radically different in a way that reveals the

fabricated nature of her own subordination to Beli. Butler makes a similar point in her first chapter of *Gender Trouble* by asserting that a repetition of the dominant hegemonic law can begin a breakdown of that very same law,

If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is “before,” “outside,” or “beyond” power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream...to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement (Butler 41-42).

Lola’s narrative makes the same point that Butler is making here: that the laws governing the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* eventually breakdown due to their own fabricated nature. Ironically, the way for Lola to resist the law that governs Yunior’s story is by repeating these rules, once more in her own narrative. Although the governing principles between the bruja feeling and fukú are the same, the differences in Lola’s performances in each narrative reveals the inability of the law to generate the same identities that they should. Because the rules of both narratives are the same, but the identity that Lola has remains fundamentally different in each, she reveals how the law cannot continue to regulate her performance of gender. Therefore, if Yunior creates his laws of fukú for the purpose of regulating Lola’s performance as an empowered, masculine, character, then her own personal behavior as an oppressed woman, in relation to her mother, reveals the pointlessness that these laws have for carrying out their intended purpose of dictating what identity she can and cannot have. Furthermore, since we have seen that the rules of omnipresence that dictate Lola’s submissiveness are the same that Yunior uses to define fukú and zafa, Lola’s lack of agency points to the constructed nature of these two terms. If the rules underlying these two terms were not fabricated, and reflective of an unconstructed reality, then Lola should be just as empowered in her personal voice as she was in Yunior’s narrative.

Starting first with the past, continually moving to the present, and ending with an affirmation of his discourse's continuation in the future, Yuniór successfully created a narrative that capably functions to satisfy his need for sexual dominance. Like Trujillo's Dominican Republic, Yuniór is able to create, through *fukú* and *zafa*, a political environment dictated by its own alternative ethics that allows him to rewrite history while subverting any kind of power that does not involve his own astounding capability for sexual control. Furthermore, by allowing some malleability with his discourse through incorporating Oscar's compassionate attitude in his own behavior, Yuniór is able to continue expressing his need for control without being as destructive a force as Trujillo was to the Dominican Republic. Rewriting Dominican history and that of the entire Cabral lineage, Yuniór shows the power of narrative to redefine and refashion the practices of the past into new forms for the future, and through his subversive reworking of history, is able to practice the same sexual dominance as his predecessor Rafael Trujillo Molina without having to rule over an entire nation. Contrary to this, Lola's narrative shows how one can resist a narrative's rules and dictums by performing the same regulations in a different way. Lola shows that even omnipresent entities such as *fukú* and *zafa* can be subverted in a way that reveals their fabricated nature. It is not enough to say that oppression is something that needs to be fought against by liberating people from their problems. Rather, Lola shows that oppression itself can become a parodic performance that reveals the rules underlying it to be false.

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