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## **Speaking Truth to Power: Writing (Against) History in "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" and "The Things They Carried"**

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Speaking Truth to Power: Writing (Against) History in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*  
and *The Things They Carried*

by

Karen Chau

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Thesis Sponsor: Dr. Sonali Perera

May 5, 2018

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Date

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May 5, 2018

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## 1. CONTEXT

This is true: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is author Tim O'Brien's account of narrator "Tim O'Brien's" experiences and reflections on the American War in Vietnam. This is also true: every aspect of the account is fabricated, down to the novel's dedication to the men of Alpha Company. The truth, the O'Briens suggest, is a question of perspective: from where are the truth-seekers looking? What are they looking for? And what kinds of truths do they find? The book is fiction, O'Brien announces. It didn't happen. None of it. But does your stomach believe it? Does it matter? Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes no such claim to wholesale fabrication. Instead, it is "supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," even with its narrative embellishments and omissions (Diaz 285). For Yuniors, who narrates the novel, the stakes of a "true story" lie not in the content of its truth, but in the traumatic rupture of its telling: the narrative offers a potential for recuperation or recovery of lost truths if it is compiled correctly and completely.

To tell a story enables a possibility for marginal reclamation but also engenders a moment of risk where marginal perspectives could be subsumed and integrated into the center, and effectively silenced. It is not enough to have a true story, but to tell it so that it may be heard. As "true" stories, *The Things They Carried* and *Oscar Wao* endeavor to restore fragmented narratives to wholeness and tell *their* truth towards a variety of objectives—traumatic recovery, historical compilation, and individual liberation—which may only result if the narrators are able to tell it correctly. This project confronts the unspeakable: their use of elision, footnotes, and structural fragmentation of the plot, their shift between narrative codes and linguistic registers, and their fluid relationship with the reader disrupts the unity of the text and the monolithic linearity of the central truth of established History. For both novels, their confrontation of

dominant historical narrative, as constructed and read through the objects of the Archive, embodies a catastrophic moment of trauma – threatening the unity of History with a disruptive collective invocation, whether through an answering recollection or an accumulation or generation of documentation, in gesturing towards their historical narrative – a dashed rather than straight line, disrupted in chronology, perspective, and diffused in its ownership. Detached from a centrally organized structure, what marks the alternative histories of the novels is less the integrity of its “truths” than its mediation of truth through narrative, its delineation of emotional truth from historical truth, and its unstable marginal perspective, framing the question of truth as a problem of reader reception and an ethical burden of witness.

Their intended audiences, however, appear to be vastly different subjects. *Oscar Wao* has typically been identified as an immigration novel given its emphasis on migration and its impact, its focus on a multigenerational family, and its treatment of the question of assimilation. *The Things They Carried* concerns the experiences of young American soldiers gone abroad to war. Viet Thanh Nguyen has written on the connections between the immigrant narrative and the war story in his examination of recollections of the Vietnam War, and argues that perhaps they are not as estranged as readers would like them to be. In his analysis of war stories and, particularly, Vietnam War-era historical fiction, he questions the dictated and common narratives of the war story by questioning who determines its framing. “[What] if we understood immigrant stories to be war stories?” he asks (Nguyen 4). For Nguyen, the war story and the immigrant narrative exist in a continuum of a larger political and cultural process of wartime existence. The narrative matrixes inform and rely upon each other for their interpretations in an enfolded and enmeshed way. What marks the boundary between center and periphery is troubled by the nature of their admixture and association.

In their process of syncretism, the narrators of both *The Things They Carried* and *Oscar Wao* necessarily confront and challenge the existing trove of documentation and oral narrative that instantiates myth, history, and popular culture—the Archive. Within both novels, this Archive generates an authoritative narrative of events in several ways, being both dictated through a centralized perspective, as well as maintaining a dominant position of power over alternative narratives—which stands as an official record called History. In doing so, it constructs the relationship between historical record and memory as a kind of binary; if accounts conflict, one perspective, solidified through verified documentation or validated through a claim to facticity, repudiates the unverifiable and unproven other, which remains untethered from centrality in its proof, the subjects it represents, and its narrative. History becomes a tool that may be used towards, or against, imperialism and domination. As Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak wrote in her own investigation of History, “the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured” (“History” 208). Diaz’s and O’Brien’s narrators attempt to seize narrative control towards their own aims of personal liberation by attempting to work inside and outside the center-margin dynamic simultaneously; while their accounts and claims to truth rupture the unity of History, they also attempt to suture the fragmented nodes of their own marginal histories into narrative. The goal is not centralized structural unity, but rather a coherent fragmentation which mediates a third intermediate position within the center-margin binary, defined by exchange and mixture. By compiling or generating documentation and recording marginal accounts, Diaz’s and O’Brien’s narrators build a counter-archive that threatens the stability of the binary of memory and history, and truth and fiction, in an attempt to voice a potentially unspeakable truth; their “catastrophic” archive disconnects the linear narrative of History in favor of more diffuse fragmentation where narrative codes guide

interpretation, but do not authoritatively dictate it, and the reader becomes complicit in the consequences and effects of interpreting narrative in favor of a particular Historical narrative. The novels explore this formally and generically in troubling the relationship between text and reader (and narrator and reader) through interplay with the typical power dynamic to one cognizant of and reliant upon the reader's active work of interpretation. The reader directly participates within the act of constructing narrative—hearing and judging contradictory testimonies to identify the ones that come nearest to truth. To evaluate and determine History, the texts argue, demands an ethics of listening. To “listen” is to endorse and to believe—to place something as belonging within the central space of truth. Operating in conjunction with belief, the reader's choice to “hear” determines whether stories inhabit the space of the center, or are maligned to the margin. Determining which narratives to privilege and which voices to promote not only underlies the narrator's act of narrative construction, but also indicates which narratives become officially sanctioned—in short, what is “true.”

A comprehensive and substantial Archive of documentation underlies the larger accepted historical narrative of both novels: whether the American War in Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*, or the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic in *Oscar Wao*. Both historical frames are mired in contested history, myth, and misinformation; both Archives have since faced considerable review and criticism. The American War in Vietnam stands as one of the most unpopular wars in American history, resulting in approximately 60,000 American deaths and 2 million Vietnamese deaths (Mintz and McNeil 1). It also represented one of the touchstones marking the shifting balance of trust between American citizens and their government. Cloudy motives, shifting timelines, and prolonged engagement defined the American presence within Vietnam. Even the chronology is contested. As Heather Stur of the Foreign Policy Research



Institute has noted, the beginning of the war could be marked at three separate points: “the 1940s when President Harry Truman authorized U.S. financial support of the French War in Indochina,” “the 1950s when the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam in two and President Dwight Eisenhower offered U.S. aid,” or the arrival of boots on the ground in 1965 (Stur1). The war featured intersecting economic, political, and strategic objectives, especially given the influence of the Cold War within international politics (1). As the war stretched into 1967, it grew increasingly unpopular, leading the government to take greater measures over message management in an attempt to sell support for the war among American citizens. A “credibility gap” emerged between citizens and the government as public strategy debates revealed “what critics perceived as an omission of essential facts” (Daddis 180)<sup>1</sup>. By the end of the war, American trust in government had declined sharply with “the sharpest dips in confidence [occurring] after the American involvement in Vietnam and the 1972 Watergate incident” (Nye Jr. 107).<sup>2</sup>The government attempted to manage public response through control and manipulation of facts, and by reshaping the related narrative.

In contrast to the US government’s softer tactics of narrative control, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, then-leader of the Dominican Republic, exerted control over the individuals of the public with extensive use of brute force and terror, including assassinating and “disappearing” political opponents. Presiding over the country as a self-declared “Benefactor of the Fatherland, Rebuilder of the Financial Independence of the Republic, First Journalist, Chief Protector of the Dominican Working Class, and Genius of the Peace” from 1930 to his assassination in 1961, his

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<sup>1</sup>Daddis attributes this to two primary forces: Lyndon B. Johnson’s insistence that the military continue to shore up public support for a war that had already taken significant American investment in terms of funding and troops, as well as the military’s inability to ascertain or effectively measure their progress within the scale of the conflict and, indeed, to define what progress (or successful engagement) within Vietnam would be.

<sup>2</sup> See also the Pew Research Center’s tracking of public trust in government polling. By the end of 1974, trust in the US government was averaging at 35%, significantly lower than the 77% of 1964.

reach extended well beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic, as evidenced in his disappearance of Jesús de Galíndez, a Columbia University lecturer who criticized the regime, in 1956 (“Trujillo” 1). Despite his noted deeds, Trujillo’s personal biography has frequently been obscured or rewritten, potentially due to the presence of black Haitian relations in his lineage.<sup>3</sup> During the regime, he also linked himself with God as well as the entire framework of the state, crafting himself as a kind of fetish object for the nation, equally omnipotent and mystified<sup>4</sup> (106). Diaz, via Yuniors, engages with this legacy in the preface to the novel, glossing the history of Trujillo and his reign over the Dominican Republic as well as its political and historical ramifications within the space of a footnote. He bestows his own titles, labeling Trujillo as “El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface,” “our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator,” and describes him as a “portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery” (Diaz 2 FN). In the space of the footnote, Diaz utilizes form to link his divergent comments with the platform he critiques. His titles recall the stylistic conventions of Trujillo’s own self-bestowed honorifics while the brief description of Trujillo in his attributes and fashion suggests at the typical summarizing prose of a history textbook. By relegating his information to the footnote, Diaz acknowledges and maintains a semblance of academic context, connecting his narration with the continuity of previous historical narration, even as the profanity of the comments and the slangy tone of voice contradict it.

This use of narrative voice, form, and intertextuality emphasizes the construction of

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<sup>3</sup>See further, *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, “Trujillo.” This became another aspect of his authoritarian regime. As the “Trujillo” entry notes, any declaration seeking to link him with Haitian (read: black) ancestry was labeled an act of treason. His official biographers also claimed connection with aristocratic and royal ancestry, which was never able to be definitively established.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Lauren Derby explores, popular narratives during Trujillo’s reign connected him with the supernatural, from his relationship with divining women to the presence of his “*muchachito*, which means literally little boy, but also can indicate... a midget, a demon or a kind of personal guardian angel” (Derby 95).

narrative not only within the scope of the novel, but also within History, in a kind of poststructural play. The narrators intrude into the narration of the text and the continuity of the telling, reorient narrative perspective and chronological position, and disrupt the narrative codes and registers within which the text operates. Despite the novels' attempts to "suture" their perspectives with History, dislocation abounds. As Roland Barthes argues in "From Work to Text," what defines the Text is "a notion of *play*; the engendering of the perpetual signifier...in the field of the Text is not achieved by...a hermeneutic process of 'delving deeper,' but rather by a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, variations" ("Work" 59). This concept of textual play underlies Diaz's and O'Brien's approach to narration within their novels as well as to larger engagement of their text within the historical theater. Diaz's constant shift in linguistic register and generic referent within the narration of *Oscar Wao*, for example, generates variations of meanings through the interplay between the registers and codes. In one footnote, he acknowledges his reference to Jack Kirby before concluding, "we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on '*la face cachée de la Terre*' (Earth's hidden face)" (Diaz 92 FN). While the space of the footnote connotes an academic context and an initial marginal remark (the callout to Jack Kirby), the content then reverts to comic book subculture before returning to Edouard Glissant, a prominent critical and historical figure of scholarship and postcolonial studies; the footnote clarifies Yuniors' adoption of the label Watcher in reference to his own position over the text, the saga of the de Leon family, and his own failure of intervention with Oscar and Lola. In the space of a two-line footnote, the text refers simultaneously to Yuniors and his narrativity and to contexts of postcolonial discourse and American pop culture (and its associations with both low and high culture). Marginal cultures of the subaltern and the socially awkward nerd are being temporarily joined in the face of supervillainy and colonialism.

The figure of the Watcher is especially significant as it operates among several thematic threads of the novel as well. Uatu the Watcher introduces himself and his species (in the *Fantastic Four*) as “people [who] roam the entire known universe, watching, observing other worlds! [...] But during all the ages, we have done *nothing but watch*—*never* have we interfered! Never have we made our presence known! But now I have broken the silence of centuries, in order to save your people from savagery!” (Lee and Kirby 14, initial emphasis mine).<sup>5</sup> The Watcher’s position occupies a variety of registers, both personal and political. While Yuniór identifies with the Watcher, his own narrative style differs sharply from the objective and neutral stance that the Watchers (as a species) live by. While the Watcher breaks his own code to intervene in this instance to avoid open war between the American Fantastic Four and a Russian mad scientist with his super-intelligent apes, Yuniór has no corresponding moment of intervention and action within the tragedy of Oscar’s life, or within the breakdown of his relationship with Lola. Politically, the United States also connects with the figure of the Watcher, not only due to their occupation of the Dominican Republic, but also in their inaction with respect to the Trujillo regime. It may also be a commentary on Cold War relations in the time of the issue’s release (1961). In its intertextual reference, Diaz’s narration confronts the fiction of the unified Archive—pop cultural archives (comic books) respond to the academic (footnoted Glissant), the factual-historical, the political (the Cold War references), which are themselves comments upon the historical theaters in which he writes (the Trujillo dictatorship within the Dominican Republic, American occupation, migration, and assimilation). The Archive does not and cannot stand alone, but is instead segmented and fractured, its information cross-referenced, interpreted, and understood through alternate registers of understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> See also: Vol. 1, No. 13, p. 23, “For we Watchers must be ever aloof—ever apart from other races!” What defines the Watchers is their inaction as well as their distance from their subjects, further troubling Yuniór’s identification with the Watcher especially in relation to the de Leon family, with whom he has multiple points of contact.

For both novels, and in both historical contexts (of the Trujillo dictatorship and the American War in Vietnam), the fiction of the whole Archive makes the man; its insistence on documentation, and generation and release of “official” information shapes narrative, if not public behavior or response. It is the record that stands. As Spivak has noted, an archive of records may be read as “the construction of a fiction whose task was to produce a whole collection of ‘effects of the real’” (“History” 203). When Spivak reads the records of the East India Company for how it constructs a specific terrain named “India,” she identifies how the power of that construction also reveals how the “colonizer constructs himself” (203). Trujillo and the US government maintain control over bodies of information and documentation in an attempt to shape which “effects of the real” will result. In doing so, they seek to establish the truth within the range of their power, and dictate the codes which will inflect the reading (and understanding) of History. History gains a logic and a linearity, linked by an evidence-based order; it locates a center. As Jacques Derrida has argued in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” every structure is constituted by a center “which governs the structure, while escaping structurality. [...] The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center” (Derrida 248). What stabilizes the structure of History is the concept of verifiable truth, established through the body of documentation and artifacts that form the Archive.

To destabilize the structure requires resistance against it, but also a dislocation of the center. For Diaz and O’Brien, this entails a challenge to the centrality of verifiable truth as a stable and stabilizing concept through textual play that engenders ambiguity and insists upon an active reader engagement with the text and its hermeneutics, as well as a generalized assault on the totality of History through a positive construction of a diffuse, non-linear, non-chronological

narrative, fractured in its presentation and disconnected from any singular dominant subjectivity, authoritative narration, or body of documentation. It is no Archive, but instead an Amalgam—relying on the collective collage of subjectivities, testimonies, fictional representations, unsourced rumor, and unexplained (or absent) documentation to construct an account of events that neither explains, contextualizes, nor encodes for the reader, but simply tells. It does not guarantee the whole truth, as the Archive does, but rather an approximation. This is “supposed to be a true account,” Yunion says, as it is the reader who must adjudicate its truth and, in so doing, reveal the parameters by which truth, for her, can be evaluated and realized.

## 2. CENTER

For the structure of the Archive, the Derridean center of the concept of truth is founded upon established documentation and official record. Those whose claims escape being marked with official recognition have no place within the Archive and so stand outside of it. Those truths become marginal and marginalized. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, in comparing J.M. Coetzee and Daniel DeFoe's texts, finds the "*marginal* [to be] in the narrow sense [...] the victims of the best-known history of centralization: the emergence of the straight white christian man of property as the ethical universal" ("Theory" 5, emphasis in original). The margin, in this understanding, is externally defined against a dominating center. Sneja Gunew clarifies the identification of center and margin around a dynamic of desire: "First, 'What does the margin want?' (as though there were always only one margin). And secondly, 'What does the centre want?' (as though the only desire the margin could have would be to claim the centre)" (Gunew 142). The margin is thus defined as an area lying outside of the center whose only claim to legitimacy and authority is to replace or join the center, and whose marginal desires must be articulated through a central frame of understanding.

Both Gunew and Spivak seek to complicate the simplistic relations of center and margin. Gunew identifies how the margin may also operate as a site for disruption (for example, if a student's essay excludes the presence of a margin altogether), as well as a site for discipline (for example, in a teacher's marking of essays) (142). Spivak emphasizes the role of exchange at play within the center-margin dynamic: to the ways in which "the official explanation... is defined and reproduced by the explanation that it can express"; and in identifying how the margin locates itself as margin ("Marginalia" 107). Diaz, riffing off several margins, exemplifies Gunew's question of competing and concurrent marginal desires: whether as a member of "nerd"

subcultures, as Latinos, as immigrants, or as Dominican-Americans. The relationship the periphery holds with the center fluctuates with the shift in margin. For O'Brien, whose characters seem to embody a structurally center position (the heterosexual, middle-class, and white), marginality does not constitute itself in the subjectivity of the individual but in the relation of the subject to the larger structure (of cultural archive, of History, of America, etc.). A historical context lends these questions greater significance in part because of the ways in which the construction or isolation of a "margin" generates consequences of violence or oppression. These consequences do not just play out in the space of political and historical theater, but affect interpersonal and international dynamics as well. As Spivak describes in her analysis of the relation between public and private, "the definition of the private is marked by a public potential since it *is* the weave, or texture, of public activity" ("Marginalia" 103). The private includes a public potential in her view, and is thus enfolded within it, just as the center is equally determined by the margin. Centrality is "defined and reproduced" by its explanations as much as it dictates those explanations. Spivak's public-private textile "weaves" through both texts, which connects this mixture of public and private as key to the operations of the Amalgam, troubling the dynamics of any perceived binary between the two. Private lives speak toward and against public myths, inflecting marginal experiences into the center while illustrating marginal facets of the central experience.

As subjects shift between the two (or locate an intermediating position), the center and the margin reconfigure their relation within a dynamic of estrangement and disassociation, as well as mixture. One such center across both texts is the concept of "home." As Freud has argued, "home" may become threatening due to its proximity to the familiar. Distinguishing the concept of "*heimlich*" from its antonym, "*unheimlich*," Freud argues, requires a recognition of



how both concepts are enfolded within each other until such point of divergence. As he clarifies, “*Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (Freud 199-201). Moreover, *heimlich* contains dual definitions within itself, representing familiarity and security as well as the hidden and secretive. By framing *heimlich* and *unheimlich* as ends of a continuum, Freud suggests they are bound up within each other. An object cannot become *unheimlich* unless and until it contains the *heimlich*. As the soldier returning home to America, or the immigrant family returning to the motherland, knows, what stands as familiar can become frightening in its novelty; it is the revelation of something horrific within something previously known. For the de Leon family, what is unearthed are years of traumatic family history and the threat of the completion of a fukú; for the American soldiers, it means returning to a place where the logic of the wartime mind no longer holds true and the reality of life has distorted into a simulacra of the vivid intensity of the battlefield.

For *Oscar Wao* and *The Things They Carried*, the common and foundational myth of the American Dream looms largest, reinforcing not only a mythic center of “home” but also of “America.”. A term initially attributed to James Truslow Adams, it refers to an aspiration in quality of life for all its citizenry, that all citizens should achieve a “better, richer, and happier life” regardless of rank or station (Cullen 4). Central to the American identity, this Dream has codified its own particular myth, which both texts resist in their attempt to generate the alternative history of the Amalgam. O’Brien riffs on this exchange in the opening story of *The Things They Carried* when his narrator enumerates the physical and symbolic objects of Americana and the American project borne by the soldiers on the ground. This recitation of what appears to be bare facts grounds the tone of the novel in the seemingly dry and historical from the outset—the language and bearing of the (American historical) Archive. Opening with

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross bearing the emotional weight of his love for a friend back home, represented in the physicality of her letters (which he carries), the text then shifts to the wide range of parameters that defines the carrying performed by all of the soldiers. Their task is defined by a sense of fragmentation, organized around their individual identities. What they carry is motivated not only by necessity, but by role, by personal comfort, and by their own histories. Once they begin to carry the land of Vietnam, it is America that they end up discarding

because by nightfall the resupply choppers would arrive with more of the same ... fresh watermelons and crates of ammunition and sunglasses and woolen sweaters—the resources were stunning—sparklers for the Fourth of July, colored eggs for Easter—it was the great American war chest—the fruits of science, the smokestacks, the canneries, the arsenals at Hartford, the Minnesota forests... (O'Brien 15)

The (American mythical) Archive speaks here insistent and persistent, its size enormous, its resources endless. The items “Tim,”<sup>6</sup>the narrator, selects are themselves a range of the American experience: non-native produce, weapons, commercial supplies, and the materials for holiday celebration sourced from sites of American industry and natural resources.

If the American Dream invokes an image of America of great riches and wealth, including its amber waves of grain, then the soldiers of *The Things They Carried* simultaneously accept and reject it through consumption and waste. Nor is this Archive of America fixed; rather, “America” occupies multiple and different registers, embodying, for example, a site of refuge and prosperity for the immigrant, expansive potential for ambition and exploitation for the businessman, a beacon representing faith, liberty, and good for the liberating soldier, etc. Both novels seek to interact and respond to several registers on which the center of “America” resound, and potentially articulate a new interpretation. In O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,”

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<sup>6</sup> The narrator of *The Things They Carried* is “Tim O’Brien,” who bears the name of, but is a separate entity from, the author. Unless otherwise indicated, “Tim” in quotation marks shall indicate the narrator only.

America defines itself through its cornucopic presence: for the soldiers defending the interests of the American imperial project abroad, America projects itself as a resource of plenty in the largesse of its “war chest” as well as in the riches of its mythology and ideals (truth, justice, and the American way). The response is either consumption or rejection. The soldiers do both, simultaneously abiding by the parameters dictated by the (American mythological) Archive and resisting it through a kind of cannibalization. The soldiers destroy their gifts, borne from the natural resources and labor of the home nation, in the knowledge that more will come. They dispose of supplies “purely for comfort,” and due to convenience, superstition, and standard operating procedure (O’Brien 13). As they navigate the space of wartime, the bodies of the men of Alpha Company represent a contested symbolic space that includes the “liberated joss sticks and statuettes of the smiling Buddha” from Vietnam as much as “*The Stars and Stripes*” (13). Their packs and their bodies mediate between the centers of America (“home” and the democratic) against the marginal country and culture they live among. Alongside the necessary supplies comes mythological America, packaged within its cultural artifacts of Easter eggs and sparklers.

The battlefield as an interstitial site represents a necessary stage in the interaction, and attempted distinction and separation, of center and periphery. Contact engenders a possibility for contamination. The American center thus must be located and fixed, through artifacts and ceremonies of cultural significance, to avoid any rupture in the center-margin dynamic. America must be enacted for the soldiers themselves as much as for the Vietnamese. As “Tim” indicates in his narration, “for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry” (15). In contrast to the “ambiguities,” “mysteries and unknowns” of Vietnam stands the duties and

responsibilities of their position as American soldiers, certain and unchanging.

For the de Leon family in *Oscar Wao*, the power of America lies in its strategic and political value, one being its ability to deliver the members of their family from the perils of living in dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. The de Leon family migrates to America in search of salvation from the authority and ruthlessness of the Trujillo regime; yet, contrary to the American Dream, this migration signals no progression. The arrival to New York does not improve upon their lives in the Dominican Republic, nor guarantee safety. When Beli first lands in the United States, surrounded by other awed passengers on the plane, she snaps, “I’ve already seen it” (Diaz 165). The Romance of the new arrival is instead undercut by her having “already seen” what is on offer. Yuniors, the narrator, then lists what America has to offer Beli and her family: “the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo” (164). Migration brings an absence of warmth and community—a disconnection rather than an easy entry. Private lives and histories—in this case, that of Beli—challenge the myths of the Archive by questioning the benefits, resisting the center’s articulation of marginal desire. If, as Spivak notes, the center constructs the margin through its communications (which then reinforce its own centrality), Diaz has the margin respond here to a center it deconstructs, questioning, if not redefining, the center altogether. The center is thus articulated through a marginal frame and within a dynamic exchange.

This dynamic of exchange and contest of desires and narrative agency of centers and margins bound the historical-political-imaginative intersecting space of the war story (both the traditional war story and, as Viet Thanh Nguyen has textured, the *immigrant* war story). As John Timmerman argues in his analysis of the art of the war story, the war story “must evoke the dreams and lives of individual soldiers, as opposed to giving a statistical or historical accounting

of data”<sup>7</sup> (Timmerman 101). “War stories” may indicate romantic wartime adventures, historical or political realistic fiction, the truth of shared experiences by reminiscing veterans or other nonfictional accounts, and the mythology disseminated by the warring governments. The term includes the blurring between historical record and fiction. The intrusion of a centralized narrating perspective blurs the distinction between the individual and the collective and the personal/factual in introducing additional context, if not in providing contradicting accounts and deliberate misinformation. For example, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “war story”, as delivered in a speech in 1966, links the US presence in Vietnam, as well as South Vietnamese resistance, to the Allied plight in World War II, as well as to the general “fight for the essential rights of human existence, and only the callous or the timid can ignore their cause” (Johnson 1). Johnson’s speech operates as a “war story” in multiple regards: as a recollection of prior heroism in World War II, it invokes a nostalgic return to heroism and greatness; as a cautionary warning of the perils of communism, it frames the US and South Vietnam as underdogs to an imposing and conquering communist threat; and as a denouncement of cowardice, it links masculinity and heroism and underscores participation in the war effort as a defining act of masculinity.

While these are all “war stories” that walk the line between fiction and reality in service of their objectives, they are not heard equally. As Peter McInerney summarizes, the introduction of misinformation generates “a gap between what could be believed because it was true, and what could not be believed because it was not true, on the one hand; and what could not be believed because it was true, and what could be believed though it was not true, on the other” (McInerney 191-192). Timmerman questions whether the disparity between “historical facticity”

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<sup>7</sup> For Timmerman, “dreams and lives” and personal narratives take primacy over the dry voice narrating “factual” history. It is personal texture that informs the larger historical and political space, and defines the war story. As in the *immigrant* war story, the war story structures larger community challenges and concerns within the narrow lens of individual lives, which become the theatrical stage wherein the contest of articulated (public/private; social/geographical/economic) desires are negotiated and articulated.

and “personal experience” is reconcilable, but fails to include what McInerney inflects in his own distinction between truth and fiction: interpretive (narrative) choice. O’Brien is especially sensitive to this distinction in delivering his own war stories. As “Tim” tells, “If at the end of a war story you feel ...that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. [...You] can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (O’Brien 65-66). “Tim’s” narrative perspective, gleaned from firsthand experience, constitutes an alternative narrative space of the war story; however, his story not only contradicts President Johnson’s representation, it actively maligns it. Johnson’s war story is invalid; the optimistic outcome it offers is nothing more than a “lie” being sold. “Tim’s” reference to salvage and waste, as well as his invocation of a power dynamic, situates the “war story” within an ethical space. The violence of war offers no “rectitude” and can only be visible in its “absolute and uncompromising allegiance to...evil.” There is no nuance and no middling ground, only “absolutes.” “Allegiance” encodes the war story within a context of nationalism and politics, and the war story, in defense of these objectives, cedes no ground. His warning expands the truth/fiction dynamic from operating between reader and narrator (or reader and Text) to negotiating the larger historical-political (“factual”) space. In doing so, he destabilizes the unity of truth; as narrator, “Tim” lies (and occasionally admits to lying) to the reader in service of a greater truth—that of dispelling the fiction of the larger “truths” of the US government in its reports on the Vietnam War. Yet this lie, in contrast to the center’s fiction of the war story, does not “victimize.” Rather, in speaking bluntly of the wreckage and byproducts of war for its enactors as well as its targets, “Tim” implicates himself as a kind of rescuer, restoring the reader from potentially joining the victims. O’Brien utilizes the marginal space of

soldier narratives to speak against American nationalism, masculinism, and invasion, even as the soldiers remain complicit within it. For example, in “On the Rainy River,” a story detailing “Tim’s” experience upon being drafted and contemplating escaping to Canada, the cultural codes underlying traditional masculinity are exposed as “Tim” realizes that he will not run to Canada for fear of embarrassment, “disgrace, [and the] patriotic ridicule” (57). Upon realizing this, “Tim” begins sobbing. The story is structured by the hallmarks of coming-of-age masculinity as well as Americana, referenced in the trove of images O’Brien cites throughout and in “Tim’s” interactions with the only other character, an old man named Elroy Berdahl. Masculinity is shifted into the center space in order to contrast “Tim’s” rupture of the narrative; there is no heroic marching to war, but a juvenile choice to abide by his obligations as a man as well as a citizen in which “patriotic” participation is necessary.

If a marginal narrative cannot be overwritten by a privileged dominant narrative, an imposing and oppressive silence may also intrude and inhabit the space of the center. Silence, within the context of the totalitarian regime, may register as deliberate silencing of oppositional perspectives and destruction of documentation. As Yuniors indicates in a footnote, Trujillo “aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries” (Diaz FN 225). The use of the footnote belies the narrator’s caution; the truth of the dictatorship is spoken, albeit within the safety of the margin. The “true border of the countries” spatially represents itself in the structured geography of the narrative. María del Pilar Blanco has written about the ways in which *Oscar Wao* utilizes form in order to represent the “New World” as a fragmented archipelago through the layering of the narrative (Del Pilar Blanco 54). The footnote encompasses one layer of Yuniors’ narrative machinations, simultaneously corresponding to

historical territory within the geography of the Dominican Republic.

A marginal space by design, the footnote enables Yuniors to make political commentary within a kind of safe space: as extratextual comment, the footnote does not disturb the unity of the primary narrative text of *History*, yet by documenting it at all, even within the margin, Yuniors performs an act of resistance by challenging the Trujillo regime's absolute control of documentation. The footnote also signals the intermixture and weaving of the public and the private within narrative space; within dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, there still exists a possibility for what folklorist David Samper identifies as the "backstage discourse of the subaltern" (Samper 2). The "backstage" nature of this discourse within *Oscar Wao* joins considerations of form to its politics against authoritarian force and silencing; the footnote "speaks" but in aside—to be found by those who care enough to go searching. Yet despite Yuniors's attempts, "Beli's silence and other folk's lingering unease when it comes to talking about the regime" means some information "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" (Diaz 119). While Yuniors refers to a lack of personal testimony and an unwillingness to speak, he physicalizes this as document—a blank page. His "work" in writing the novel commits these personal testimonies, presumably delivered orally, through the mediation of his narrative to text in an attempt to answer for the absent pages of the "editorializing" of the Trujillo regime. Yet his framing does not attend to his constructive work, but refers to his project as recuperation and "what [he] managed to unearth." His reliance on text as a medium drags the "backstage discourse" into center stage. Where "Tim" explicitly shifts his ethics—an allegiance to evil—into the narrative foreground to reframe the ethical position of the center, Diaz, in resisting a negative presence of silence, can offer a reversal—a centering, however briefly, of the margin, in



order to respond to the authority of the center. To return to Spivak's consideration of the archive, the work of "deletions indicate explicitly what is always implicit: that meaning/knowledge intersects power. These deletions...are just as operative in fabricating an answer to the question: 'Who is the native?'" ("History" 215). These deletions not only construct subjectivities, as Spivak indicates, but also maintains the content and character of the Archives. For Diaz, the deletions embody a register of absence, enforced through Silence and Trujillo's direct manipulation of History. For O'Brien, it embodies the adoption of an ethical perspective selectively reinforced through narrative. The "war stories" of war and immigration generate fictions that seek to establish the subjects of "immigrant" and "soldier" and relegate to the margin those whose experiences defy their central accounts. Trujillo maintains a stranglehold on all information and writing in order to define the center and margin and allow them to dictate and propagate the "official," and thus only, explanation permitted.

### 3. MARGIN

Given the center's absolute control over documentation and narrative, what survives in the margin must necessarily operate subversively. Operating outside of the Archive, the margin is excluded from "History" and the definitively provable. There also exist multiple margins. Spivak identifies a marginalized memory which operates in counterpoint to the archive. In "the archives, where the past is already digested as the raw material for history writing, the past here is a past of memory, which constitutes itself differently in different subjects interconnecting" ("History" 239). The mnemonic past does not only represent "raw material" for History-making, but embodies the relations of a multiplicity of subjects. In this dynamic, time maintains a continuous, yet ruptured, connection between precoloniality and postcoloniality in the postcolonial state, generating a deferred interstitial space between the two that allows for interplay and exchange. Memory and history, as one center-margin relation, bear a similar relationship with the archive operating at their intersection.

The Archive, for Spivak, represents a body of historical documentation and information, counterposed to a separate body entitled literature. The archive "selectively [preserves] the changeover of the episteme—as its condition; with "literature" in the narrow sense—all its genres—as its effect" ("History" 203). Literature reproduces the conditions the archive establishes, and propagates them within culture. As Spivak argues in "Explanation and Culture," "in the production of every explanation, there is the itinerary of a constantly thwarted desire to make the text explain" ("Marginalia" 105). The center and margin articulate different desires and thus seek to explain different things. Consider the dictatorial control of the Archive in Trujillo's Dominican Republic: Trujillo's control of documentation is intended to shape the image of himself within text and global contexts rather than influence his image with his people. It is a

deliberate architecture of History as text through physical domination, which simultaneously elevates a culture of exalt around his persona. The Archive generates and maintains a silence, and supplies its own lack. Literature reifies this exchange and maintains these registers across culture. As Diaz describes, Trujillo's exertion of power and dominance "inflicted a true border on the countries, a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people" (Diaz 225). The border is bounded by textuality, yet lies outside of it. While it is "carved directly into the histories," it also takes root in the "imaginaries." The impact of his power cannot be mapped, centralized within documentation as well as dictatorial enforcement and abuse on the ground. As Yuniors tells it, "when the Allies won World War II...[those] who did know [it had happened] believed the propaganda that Trujillo had played an important role in the overthrow of the Japanese and the Hun" (225). There is a bilevel gesture here: Diaz refers to one register of History (the American and the "Western" political) in order to critique the construction of Trujillo's illegitimate claim through propaganda; in doing so, truth and falsehood remain encoded by the same structure of History. One recognizes Trujillo's artifice by referring to the other archive as evidence. The unity of the Archive is pierced by the registers it contains.

In opposition to the written documentation of History, orality and rumor offer an alternative account which is neither joined to text nor bound strictly with fact. Orality, founded upon oral narratives that circulate and accrue within a given community, may contribute to the Archive as much as respond to it; however, its reliance upon the collective community for its generation and propagation may loosen its ties to the dominant central narrative due to the difficulty of enforcing parameters of construction across a diffuse field of contributors. Alistair Thomson has examined the benefits and disadvantages of orality as a container for

communicating history, arguing that it may “[give] public affirmation to people whose lives and memories have been made marginal,” although the documenting historians themselves may be ill-equipped to manage the trauma oral-historical interviews provoke, or to navigate the conflict between their responsibility to the interviewed subject and to “society and history” at large (Thomson et. al. 34-35). Thomson locates the problem within the risk marginality poses to the marginal subject. When the margin presents its opposing viewpoint, the center may either maintain its dominant position through refutation of the alternative view, or adapt and enfold it within the central discourse, blunting it of the force or urgency that defines its marginal telling. In doing so, the center maintains the placement of the margin even as aspects of marginality enter into the center. In his analysis of oral-historical narratives, Thomson’s approach favors “shared authority” wherein the perspectives of oral history and researched documentation are balanced in order to navigate the “tension between theoretical developments which have problematised memory and identity, and the commitment to democratic and empowering practice” (Thomson et. al. 35). In other words, orality offers its own narrative of history, culture, memory, etc., but incorporating it within History threatens the authority and power History vests in its objectivity by introducing and incorporating a charged, unverifiable, unstable subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

*Oscar Wao* frames orality as a potential competing container of historical truth in its frequent reference to rumor, common myth, and secret. Yuniors’ use of parenthetical and aside glosses the ambiguous relationship orality holds with truth in terms of evidencing shifting narrative claims. Describing Beli’s relationship with The Gangster, Yuniors notes that The

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<sup>8</sup> See also Michael Frisch’s discussion of the tensions that arise in integrating collective memory within the domain of History: “Formal history has become involved in the processes of collective memory and how that memory is seen as a living connection between a celebrated past, a problematic present, and a future requiring complex policy choices on every level from individual and family to community, state, and nation. Many similar examples...could be cited...where issues of how, by whom, and for whom history should be engaged or represented is by no means self-evident” (Thomson et. al. 38)

Gangster was “a complicated (some would say comical), affable (some would say laughable) man who treated Beli very tenderly and with great consideration, and under him (literally and metaphorically) the education begun at the restaurant was completed” (Diaz 125). Yuniors use of parenthetical invokes the whispers in the community regarding The Gangster, a figure associated with the dictatorial regime who may endanger and threaten the community. The parentheticals strip the remark of origin, leaving intact the message without individual risk. While the parentheticals interject a competing reading of Beli’s relationship with the Gangster, the repeated use of the conditional tense (“would say”) diminishes the strength of the claim. The burden of interpretation and ascribing blame thus falls to the reader.

As Diaz explicitly outlines, the reader “decide for [themselves]. What’s certain is that nothing is certain. We are trawling in silences here” (243). In the absence of absolute certainty, orality, in its variability and ambiguity, may fill these silences and offer the margin an opportunity to speak. Samper has examined in particular the utility rumor holds in relation to political resistance. He defines rumor as “unverified information that is constructed in order to explain uncertain, ambiguous events or intangible fears, anxieties, or perceived dangers. It emerges in situations where news and information is scarce”<sup>9</sup> (Samper 4). Rumors supplement the absence of documented, verifiable truth, and also perform the work of the narrator by distributing unverifiable narratives while stripping them of their origins. Rumor may rebut the deletions of the Archive and intermittently interject the marginal perspective into a central space. Perhaps no definitive claim can be made as to whether any individual subject actually made a certain comment (Did he say it? Did he not?), but the statement is still able to be heard. As with

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<sup>9</sup> Samper’s conception of rumors functions on multiple levels: individually, it operates as a subtle means of resisting hegemonic domination by providing a means to subtly voice discontent and/or criticism against the dominant policies in place; additionally, Samper notes that it may lead to larger-scale organizing in its ability to sustain and maintain social networks through its person-to-person transmission style.

any marginal narrative addition, it remains in perpetual threat of absorption into the center.

The narrative instability of the margin, however, enables an opportunity to engage in textual play with History, and to utilize the looseness of marginal narratives with respect to truth-claims to inflect an analysis of History. As “Tim” describes in “Spin,” moving between narrating the good and bad incidents of wartime life, “the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put fancy spin on it, you could make it dance” (O’Brien 31). The references here are notable: “Ping-Pong balls” and “dance” are not typical associations with wartime; they are frivolous, creative or recreational pursuits, and are in and of themselves either neutrally coded or coded against traditional masculinity<sup>10</sup>. As in Barthes discussion of works and texts, the stories that “Tim” and his comrades circulate are narratives they can “spin” and “make...dance” (31). “Spin” is neither true nor untrue. It instead is a narrative position with respect to perspective and interpretation. As such, “Tim’s” story is rife with narrative contradictions, betraying the many hands involved in generating the story. Like the ambiguous rumor and gossip of the subjugated in the Dominican Republic, the story is shaped by multiple subjects; unlike *Oscar Wao*, O’Brien’s soldiers are hyperaware of their role within narrativity and thus attentive (perhaps too much) to the hallmarks of proper storytelling. For O’Brien’s soldiers, stories outlast *both* memory and History, expanding beyond the limitations of chronology. It extends into eternity, “when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (36). The power of the narrator to communicate lies vested in the power to shape and retell the story.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” comes to “Tim” via Rat Kiley, “who swore up and down to its truth, although, in the end, I’ll admit, that doesn’t amount to much” (85). Narrative fragmentation and play with narrative form blur any distinction between truth and fiction and

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<sup>10</sup>This also reinforces a particularly American cultural stance with respect to gender coding; as Oscar de Leon can attest, dancing is not coded as non-masculine in all cultural contexts.

highlight the significance of “spin.” For example, Rat’s portions of the story are not set off in quotation marks, but are marked by commas and a simple dialogue tag (“Rat said”). Like Diaz, the lack of punctuation suggests the story is unreliable. The further into telling the story Rat goes, the more the responsibility of telling the story burdens him. His anxieties infiltrate into the material of the narrative, forcing his listeners to intervene. Mitchell Sanders advises that “all that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can’t clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic. What you have to do...is [...get] the hell out of the way and let it tell itself” (101). Sanders’ interjection already interrupts the delivery of the unified narrative. As other men—the listeners—intervene, the objective is sabotaged further. The intrusion of additional narrators does not, as they believe, clarify, but instead provides additional perspectives with which to refract the account. Even as Mitchell Sanders advises Rat to “get the hell out of the way,” he ignores the problematics of his own presence in doing so. Much like mass rumor, Sanders’ comment suggests that the war story has no anchoring origin. Rat’s failure lies in trying to “tell” it at all, rather than letting it display itself. Like the rumor, the war story is defined by its exchange and delivery, which is simultaneously social, informational, and, as Samper suggests, reflects the anxieties and fears of the area in which they circulate.

This relationship of exchange that guides the style of narration also informs the ethics of telling the truth. As Giorgio Mariani writes of “How to Tell a True War Story,” the story outlays ambiguity and double meaning from the outset in its title: it “may be paraphrased as ‘how to narrate a true war story,’ a title emphasizing the mode in which a responsible and committed storyteller should deliver his or her tale so as not to contaminate its truth. The title...can also be glossed as saying ‘how to recognize a true, as opposed to false, war story’” (Mariani 172-173). A

third potential option may be that the “how” refers towards an ethics of telling, one not entirely concerned with the “contamination” of truth. The story details Rat Kiley writing the sister of a recently deceased friend, and sharing their exploits in war and “how her brother would always volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer for in a million years, dangerous stuff, like doing recon or going out on these really badass night patrols. Stainless steel balls [her brother had], Rat tells her” (O’Brien 64). The ethics of the battlefield—where violence and risk are encouraged and rewarded—are transplanted home to the dead friend’s sister, for whom no response is possible other than silence. For the central narrative of war, there can be no thrill to what is intended to be a distinctly “moral” campaign and political strategy. Despite the fact that “Rat pours his heart out. He says he loved the guy. He says the guy was his best friend in the world. They were like soul mates, he says, like twins or something, they had a whole lot in common. [...] The dumb cooze never writes back” (65). “Tim’s” repeated emphasis on “he says” insists that this is Rat’s story, and reinforces Rat’s increasing urgency in his search to connect with his dead friend’s sister.

Rat “tells” the story as he “mails” the letter, to find it rejected by its intended audience. What defines his friend’s soldiering experience is not heroic or brave, but rather a full commitment to the violence of war in “always raising hell and lighting up villes and bringing smoke to bear every which way” (64-65). The story attempts to supplement the lack of History, but no one listens. The absence of a response suggests two potential circumstances: the sister’s rejection of the narrative of her brother’s actions in wartime by refusing to hear, or the military’s rejection of the narrative by censoring the outgoing letter. While the “war story” is ostensibly Rat Kiley’s letter, “Tim” implies an alternate war story: that of Rat Kiley’s emotional experience of grief after the death of his friend. Both Rat’s attempt to reach out, as well as the stylized violence



of the complementary war story of Rat's murder of the water buffalo, frame the narrative of O'Brien's overarching "war story": that of a failure of listening. At the end of the story, "Tim" faces the same challenge when an older woman reader speaks to him about the incident with excess sympathy (which he detests) for the animal, lamenting the consequences of war. As "Tim" concludes, the failure of a story lies in the failure of its reception and the only way to correct it is to "just keep on telling it" until the reader response is one that properly listens (81).

For Yuniors, it is the ethics of telling (compiling) a story that proves problematic. Beginning the novel with a discussion of *fukú* and *zafa*, the supernatural underpinnings of the novel, the curse and its complementary counterspell, Yuniors finishes the preface with an acknowledgment that "[even] now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell" (Diaz 7). This statement positions itself within O'Brien's ethics of listening—telling is no neutrally coded act, but one that offers a recuperative and rehabilitative potential for the narrator as much as for the subjects. Yet, for Yuniors, the success of this project is not as reliant on the reader's ability to decode, as O'Brien's is, but rather equally reliant on Yuniors's ability to locate and assemble the fragments into a properly structured narrative in the first place. As Yuniors undertakes to restore the narratives of multiple generations of the de Leon family, he disclaims his work by indicating that "I'll give you what I've managed to unearth" (119). Pamela J. Rader has discussed the impact of Yuniors's role as narrator and as writer, particularly in terms of the reliability of his account. She argues that "the ever complicit reader accepts the narrator's words as a version of the truth. [...] Not only does our Narrator question his knowledge and authority on his topic, but he invites us to play along with him" (Rader 7-8). Lauren Jean Gantz has also identified the ways in which Yuniors's attempt to control and shape the narrative aligns him more with the dictatorial regimes that he attempts to work

against than he believes (Gantz 130).<sup>11</sup> Aware of the authority of the narrating position he inhabits, Yuniór comments on his narration and troubles his own perspective throughout in an attempt to maintain the ethical line of his work—to muddling success.

One contested device in particular is that of the blank page. Yuniór allows gaps of silence—the pieces of archive that have been obliterated—to remain intact within the text. These “páginas el blanco” correspond with multiple kinds of elisions: the dictatorial erasure of words, both written and spoken; post-traumatic silences; self-imposed censorship; and a loss of—or failure to restore—documentation. They are not limited in domain, but encompass both the personal and the political. Beli and La Inca, for example, face “[their] very own página en blanco” in the gap of Beli’s childhood before their reunion (Díaz 78). Rader has examined this aspect of the blank page in terms of its relation to narrativity. As Rader identifies, the página en blanco constitutes a space where dictators may be answered and refuted (Rader 5). However, it also represents a third position within the center and margin dynamic. The blank page is neither the central authoritative text nor a marginal comment; it is the evasion of any kind of concrete position<sup>12</sup>. Unlike the authoritative center, or the reactive margin, the blank page evidences and recognizes an absence even as it does nothing to supplant it. Rader outlines the possibilities of the blank page as both an authoritative text that is refuted in the physicalized texts of women’s bodies when no other speech is possible, as well as a site of imaginative potential wherein

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<sup>11</sup>Gantz relies upon the historical context of the “página el blanco” as a tool utilized by Joaquín Balaguer, an officer of the Trujillo regime, to determine her positioning of Yuniór’s placement as a narrator, as well as to Díaz’s extratextual comment on Yuniór’s position as narrator within an interview. Regarding the connection with Balaguer, the novel’s unsteady positioning (and frequent interplay with) history and memory suggests that this is a deliberate movement—perhaps even a displacement—between the blankness of the page and the action it provokes. For the authoritative center, the blank page represents an opportunity to flaunt the force behind their silence; for Yuniór, the blank page operates as a simultaneous monument of the authoritative regime as well as a blank space indicating the lack of documentation or the intrusion of a memorial that is perpetually deferred in its arrival. Furthermore, the invocation of the author against the narrative positioning of the novel’s narrator seems itself to represent a power struggle over the archive and who is permitted to speak on behalf of, or against, whom.

<sup>12</sup>As Yuniór himself acknowledges in a footnote, Joaquín Balaguer “claimed he knew who had [ordered the death of journalist Orlando Martínez] (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a página en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say *impunity?*)” (90 FN).

possibilities may be projected into empty space, whether by reader, narrator, or writer (6). La Inca and Beli, for example, have a blank page in their relationship standing in for the events of Beli's life before their reunion; Yuniór, speaking in hints and suggestions, refers obliquely to "[the] costs [and] terrible scars on her back" as a reference point for Beli's childhood. His nomenclature of the event as "*The Burning*" adds additional texture to an event that is never fully represented within the narrative (Diaz 103).

Yuniór's use of the "página en blanco" poses an interpretive problem for scholarship in part because of the ethics of his watching. As he confesses, "Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco" (149). When convenient, Yuniór utilizes the power of the emdash as well as the blank page to evade speaking further. For example, in the scene of Oscar's death, Yuniór chooses to depict the scene up to Oscar's final words. The chapter ends with Yuniór attempting to speak: "Oscar—" (322). Whether he intends for his words to be addressed to Oscar or to relate to the reader an action Oscar took is unclear. No other information is provided. The blank page stands and speaks for itself. Lauren Gantz, among other scholars<sup>13</sup>, has expressed discomfort and suspicion over Yuniór's use of the blank page, specifically as a means of overwriting the accounts of the other members of the de Leon family, including Beli, La Inca, and Lola, and misrepresenting the account of Oscar's final days for his own purposes by transforming Oscar into a "symbol of resistance to the political terror and violent legacy of the Trujillato" (Gantz 133-134). Dismissing Yuniór as another agent of the dictatorial oeuvre retains the binary relation between text and blankness, center and margin, and speaking and silenced. Yuniór may be a página el blanco in his own right, operating as an irreducible margin, an unplaceable disruption,

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<sup>13</sup> See also Machado Saez, Elena, "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora," who argues that Yuniór himself operates as a dictator of the text.

absent enough to be projected upon whilst also representing his own perspective.<sup>14</sup>

This blankness tracks Yuniors throughout the novel, and appears symbolically as an image of a blank book that haunts and follows both Oscar and himself along their journeys of self-discovery and historical recovery. In a dream, Yuniors stands in a “ruined bailey...filled to the rim with old dusty books. [...Oscar] is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and...I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank” (Diaz 325). The book stands in for the record that would be salvaged. Even so, there are blank pages that cannot operate as spaces for imaginative projection. The silence intrudes too far. Like the silence of the family under dictatorship, it “stands monument to the generations, [and] sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction” (243). As in the relationship between History and memory within Spivak’s consideration, silence and historical reconstruction operate in practices of exchange. As a narrator seeks to reconstruct an alternative history, silence becomes a necessary device to represent gaps in chronology, differences in narrative perspective, or absent information. Yet the work of reconstruction seeks to eliminate any presence of silence. Memory interposes itself within History in moments, threatening the inclusion of the margin within the center.

Yuniors’s strategic response to the domination of silence and blankness relies upon physically present material to answer History directly, with particular emphasis on artifacts. Throughout the novel, he emphasizes what documentation can be secured: personal photographs, letters, manuscripts, and other writings. Gantz has suggested Yuniors, as a narrator, consumes those artifacts in service of his own narrative over the narrative he claims to be reconstructing

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<sup>14</sup> See Diaz’s interview with the Boston Review, 2012. The consideration of Yuniors’s masculinist agenda has been a topic of much scholarship and debate. Despite the problematics of considering authorial intention, Diaz has admitted that the elliptical secret that Yuniors cannot confess within the novel—his own blank page—is the fact of his own molestation. While this remains an oblique implication within the text, it inflects the disparity between the masculine posturing of Yuniors’s narrative voice and the interposition of his silences or silencing.

(Gantz 135). As Yunior disclaims, “[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” (Diaz 243). Yunior’s reference to a “full story” illustrates his belief in the significant power of such a thing as a unified narrative<sup>15</sup>. By generating a complete account of events from unverified oral, as well as other media sources, is to authenticate “common” belief by including it as part of the historical record without any erosion of its marginality.

This difference also marks it as a site for potential discipline. Sneja Gunew identifies how the use of particular forms may then mark places where the margin may be disciplined to more closely adhere to the standards and expressions of the center. The center identifies the discourse of the margin—for Gunew, the migrant’s writing—as “diseased, abnormal, and needing to be cured at the level of linguistic competence” (Gunew 149). Assimilation becomes the method of resolution whereby the “host country/culture is produced as refuge, as promised land, as utopia” (148). While Gunew speaks of postcolonial migrant writing, her model is useful for considering Yunior and Diaz’s differing approaches to the construction of the text. In his use of first-person and referential third-person points-of-view, Yunior utilizes structural fragmentation of narrative to indicate the challenges of the work of recovery, and presents narrative reunification as the primary, if not singular, potential solution. The act constitutes a kind of assimilation; Yunior seeks to avoid the fragmentation connected with locating and recuperating traumatic narratives and alternative histories in pursuit of the utopian fiction of whole documentation. In his words, it is “supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (Diaz 285). The

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<sup>15</sup> See also Yunior’s reference to the rumored existence of Abelard de Leon’s “grimoire” about the Trujillo regime’s relationship with the supernatural: “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*. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world! *I only wish I could have read that thing*. (I know Oscar did too.) That shit would have been one wild motherfucking ride” (Diaz 245, latter emphasis mine).

“account” is singular, whole, and “supposed to be...*true*” (285). Yet despite his own desire to articulate and compile a cohesive, coherent, true history of the de Leon family saga, Yuniór can excavate the story by retaining its uneven chronology and its lapses in information. The “account” is pockmarked with gaps where the only thing evidenced is Yuniór’s desire to articulate onto that blankness. Although Yuniór attempts to mediate fragmentation through his narrative work and, in particular, the heavy lifting of the first-person narrative perspective, he can claim only partial success of reconstruction.

He also offers an alternative account to his own reconstructed archive within Lola’s section of the novel, which illustrates the recuperation of family history from an insider perspective. Lola privileges direct testimony rather than extant documentation, although she is only able to retrieve the latter. When Lola attempts to speak to La Inca, her grandmother, regarding the events of previous generations, La Inca responds by “pluck[ing] out one photo. This is your mother’s father, she offered me the photo. He was my cousin, and—She was about to say something else then she stopped” (Díaz 74-75). Lola’s narration also includes an elision, marked by the emdash—one she is unable to fill. As Lola concludes, “She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin” (75). Lola receives no truth but an unmediated physical artifact. Lola awaits a truth delayed by the trauma of the speaker, the lack of documentation, and the dominating silence of History. The narrative finds itself interrupted by a sense of traumatic latency, wherein a momentary (potentially catastrophic) rupture disperses the intensity of its experience across a wider range of time and within a limited emotional register. Lola’s proximity to the family does not engender a privileged position, but an unstable one, equally protected and threatened by silence.

However fraught Yuniór’s telling, and biased his focus, his position outside of the family

enables him access to the fukú that does not belong to him. His distanced position and personal bias allows him to view a coherent image of a narrative, even though he is unable to prove that its narrative track is definitively true. The reader must delineate the “true” narrative amid a series of competing versions and listen (and, at least within O’Brien’s narrative, identify the moral lesson at its center). This is not free play for the reader, but is instead options positioned by existing generic and narrative codes. In a section titled “A Note from your Author,” the narrator comments upon a likely reader interpretation or expectation of his representation and remarks, “I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he’s writing Suburban Tropical now. A puta and she’s not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable” (284). This not only interacts with a genre convention, but also rises out of narration to comment upon the novel’s construction. As Roland Barthes discusses in *The Death of the Author*, the *authority* of the author is vested in his/her ability “to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (“Death” 147). In his comment, Yunion structures the parameters by which the narrative should be read, avoiding the reading of Ybon within another kind of postcolonial narrative, one which would rob the final resolution of Oscar’s Romance of its triumph and sentimentality. Yunion exercises an aspect of authorial power here, even as the intrusion of narrative codes (including the titling of the section) maintains the guise of reader agency of interpretation. Yunion navigates this line between Barthes’ sriptor and author, simultaneously “[tracing] a [narrative] field without origin” and generating a narrative rife with cultural and generic interconnections that then need to be “disentangled” rather than deciphered (146-147). In doing so, he purports to offer an interpretive choice to the reader: “This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix” (285). The choice of the blue pill or the red pill is not a choice at all<sup>16</sup>. Rather Yunion, as sriptor/narrator, defines and defends his own representation by

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<sup>16</sup> In *The Matrix* (1997), the cultural reference being made in the line, the question of the red pill vs. the blue pill has

anticipating the specific narrative and generic constructs that navigate reader belief and interpretation and, in so doing, outlines the parameters by which the text is decoded.

This forces the reader into a dual position with respect to the text: not only to receive the story as it is being presented, but also to “listen,” in “Tim’s” parlance, in order to construct a “correct” understanding of the story. This aspect of the reader-narrator dynamic imbues the dynamic with tension; if there is a failure to understand, blame must be assigned—either in a failure to tell, or a failure to listen. “How to Tell a True War Story” grapples with the ethics of telling by emphasizing the failure of listening, and the universal difficulty of the task. “Tim” confesses to struggling to believe the story of a fellow comrade, but “[Sanders] wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling” (O’Brien 70). “Tim’s” failure is not his alone, but shared between the narrator (Sanders) and himself as audience. As “Tim” explains, “[In] a way, I suppose, you had to be there, you had to hear it, but I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth” (72). There is a necessity for the reader, who receives this account secondhand, to “[have] to be there” and “hear it” in the flesh, but “Tim,” and even Mitchell Sanders, is speaking at a remove himself. This is not his story, but Sanders’, we are told, but why and how Sanders knows the story to be true is absent.

Listening is framed as an ethics, one that not only nests within the ethics of war (to listen to whom, or against whom?) but also within the ethics of trauma recovery. As Geoffrey M. White explores in his analysis of the construction of national memory, the role of speaking, of testifying, maintains a key position in “entextualizing and personalizing national memory”

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itself been contested as fatalistic and offering only an illusion of choice as part of Morpheus’ specific agenda and representation of reality (Wagner and Flannery-Dailey 283). See: Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, “Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism, and *The Matrix* Project” in *Philosophers Explore the Matrix*, ed. Christopher Grau.



(White 507). White attends to the ways in which the use of first-person narrative perpetuates the presence of this testimony, particularly from soldiers, towards this objective of constructing collective national memory, even after the survivors have all passed (509). As both texts map the ways in which individual and collective narratives intersect within the Archive, the question of competing and conflicting testimonies represents an issue that readers must resolve through individual interpretation.<sup>17</sup> To listen means to invest within a particular narrative and to witness, albeit at a mediated distance—to operate on the *margin* of the war and, as Spivak defines the actions of the margin, “haunt what we start and get done, as curious guardians” (“Theory” 5). The power of the audience lies in its ability to distinguish between what is central and what is marginal, to “haunt” the boundary between truth and fiction, center and periphery, and delineate and adjudicate between them based on which they prefer to hear. Sanders’ story emphasizes the power dynamics within this haunting. Absent from the story, he speaks on behalf of a troop of men who couldn’t, who attempted to speak and faced an officer who refused to hear. What frames his story is a range of silence: “[The] guys don’t say zip. They just look at him for a while [...] and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can’t ever say. It says, man, you got *wax* in your ears. It says, poor bastard, [...] you don’t *even* want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away, because certain stories you don’t ever tell” (72). Sanders’ verb shifts mark the interplay and shift of the power dynamics of listening/speaking: he first disclaims the soldiers’ ability to speak by noting that the stare says what “can’t” be said; blame then shifts onto the listeners who “don’t” want to hear what’s now being said; and, finally, the soldiers abandon the project of speaking altogether “because certain stories you *don’t* ever tell”

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<sup>17</sup>White refers to the use of survivors’ testimony as a means of weaving the larger public, national memorial narrative within the more personal context of individual stories. “Survivors re-create ‘historic’ events in the idiom of personal experience, giving collective history meaning through the recitation of individual life stories” (White 509). The texture of the personal inflects the histories and thus makes them more emotionally resonant for the wide national audience for internalization.

(emphasis mine). The inclusion of the final “don’t” renders the exchange an ambiguous one. What begins with inability to speak ends instead in a conscious decision to avoid speaking. As Sanders concludes, “Hear that quiet, man? [...] That quiet—just listen. There’s your moral” (74). Ethics are contextualized within a vacuum of speaking; the possibility for any recuperation of ethical ground lies in the “quiet” where no narrating perspectives intrude.

Quiet, in this story, embodies two opposing positions: the quiet of the jungle experienced by the soldiers firsthand, as well as the quiet of the silence they receive when they return home. A failure to listen (to the quiet, to the soldiers’ narratives) connects with a failure to articulate an experience. A failure to listen, from the perspective of the officers in charge, culminates in a denial of the soldiers’ subjectivity and a marginalization of their experience: the inability to “hear” their narrative denies them their testimony. These failures bookend a spectrum of witness. Is it possible to bear witness through a mediated experience? Can the reader, witnessing fourth-hand, still have an opportunity to understand what is being shown or expressed? As Giorgio Mariani suggests, the exercise in attempting to tell (or to listen) “may be considered as connected to the notion of war as a supremely contradictory reality” (Mariani 181). Both sublime and hideous, violent and beautiful, war eludes telling, and its telling eludes closure. Distant listeners, readers among them, and family at home are at a remove from the knowledge and context that would allow them to decode or understand the story being told, and the vision of the war experience itself, O’Brien and Mariani suggest, lies outside of articulation. “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story,” “Tim” clarifies, and the burden of listening is one that involves hearing both within the story being told (O’Brien 81). The contradictions are contained within the entire message; to hear one over another involves a privileging of a particular kind of narrative, and to definitively mark the margin and the center, the Amalgam or the Archive.

To privilege hearing a particular narrative over another or designate it as more valid no longer embodies a passive position of reception, but constitutes a determined and active role in constructing (or writing) the narrative. Lauren Gantz, for example, has called into question Yuniór's motives for seeking to establish his compiled account by arguing that his presence displaces direct witnesses. She argues that his participation within the "face work" of grappling with his own Dominican past and identity "means that he is no longer recording. He is, in his own way, *testifying*. [...] [The] *zafa* he constructs is not, as he claims, for the sake of the de Leons—it is primarily for himself" (Gantz 133). Such an interpretation ignores the concurrent tracks of both narratives—not to speak *over*, but to speak alongside. It is the Archive which speaks in coherent linearity; for Yuniór and "Tim," their Amalgam can only be constructed through patchwork and layering of concurrent testimonies, artifacts, and narratives.

The "politics of exclusion" encompasses the ways in which the texts operate along several registers of meaning. Yuniór's narration of the events distorts their representation within the space of the text. As Rune Graulund explores in charting the linguistic registers of Díaz's text, *Oscar Wao* is marked by a "politics of exclusion" which forces readers "to accept that parts of his text will likely remain indecipherable to them" (Graulund 34). The individual reader, limited in her ability to decipher the text's range of references and narrative codes, may not be able to recover or rescue the text any more than the narrator. Yuniór admits that the primary documents he compiles, including Oscar's "books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers" are intended to be left to Isis, Lola's daughter, for the day that she comes searching, although these are never excerpted or provided for the reader's review (Díaz 330). Yet the novel, as Graulund has argued, appears to be intended for a different audience: one for whom frequent footnoted references to Dominican history and culture are necessary to understand what will

follow. None of this absolves the narrators from the control they exert over their Amalgam narratives. However, is the reader entitled to the testimony, if traumatic, if painful, if optionally excluded? As Sneja Gunew identifies, the withholding of information is an expression of “negative power, power through absence” (Gunew 153). The center-margin dynamic reorients again: the dominance of the central narrative to overwrite and absorb the margin is necessarily contained by the exercised and deliberate absence of the margin. By withholding this information, the margin acknowledges its own lack whilst simultaneously declaring its own “negative power,” interpolating itself into the central narrative while retaining its own marginality. Such manipulation over the narrative enables a disruption of the narrative space of History, generating an interstitial space where reader interpretation is required for decoding a mediated narrative, but whose interpretive parameters are also tightly controlled. Within this threatened narrative space, “Tim” and Yuniur open a recuperative potential and a possibility of stabilizing, however temporarily, marginal perspectives, long enough to tell a fragment and hope that it can be heard.

#### 4. RUPTURE

This fragmented narrative representation of history tracks within both novels, aligning with an irrupted/catastrophic representation of history. As Walter Benjamin has discussed in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” history represents the work of a traumatic recollection whereby articulating the past means to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [...] The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (Benjamin 255). The past, in Benjamin’s view, is never stable, and can never be viewed that way. Instead, it exists within instability, emerging within “a moment of danger.” This “moment” generates a rupture where the content of the item in view may be claimed, albeit, Benjamin cautions, always with a threat that the event could be claimed for oppressive use. Benjamin specifically writes against a narrative of historical progress, which both novels undertake as well. As “Tim” and Yuniors seek to articulate experiences of the past through this “moment of danger,” they confront history within the space of the traumatic rupture.

Cathy Caruth has explored this rupture within her analysis of trauma representations within text, arguing that “a history can only be grasped in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth8). By indicating the latency of the traumatic event, Caruth argues that the experience of the event may only be experienced through an act of historicizing—situating a present scenario through a frame of a past time and alternate location. As O’Brien’s soldiers return to the center (to America, as Americans), the familiar spaces and narratives of home and of the center are defamiliarized given their extensive contact with the margin. As they seek to reintegrate into the center from the contact point of the center-margin, the traumatic flashes of marginality intrude into their central experience; what sutures them is the process of exchange of

historicization. Traumatic “history” aligns with the alternative histories that the narrators have been recuperating; to contextualize them historically would require a resolution and disposition of the traumatic event, and also force reconciliation between marginal histories and the central narrative.

“Speaking of Courage,” the chapter detailing Norman Bowker’s return from war, exemplifies this uncanny experience of return. As “Tim” explains, when Bowker returns, he discovers “[the] war was over and there was no place in particular to go” (O’Brien 131). Aimless and alone, Bowker circles his hometown lake and envisions conversations he could have with various people within his life. There are dead childhood friends, old high school friends grown old, his father, and “two young boys...hiking with knapsacks and toy rifles and canteens” (133). Susan Farrell has theorized that O’Brien reinforces the power of the imagination as a tool for healing, yet this neglects the fraught and antagonistic relationship Bowker seems to bear against his own imaginings (Farrell 18). As in Caruth’s discussion of traumatic time, Bowker enters a perpetual present in his loops around the lake where images of the past, whether bygone Americana or the war, or the war veiled within images of Americana, intrude as momentary flashes. As John Timmerman summarizes, “Norman measures the town by the huge psychological distance he has grown from it” (Timmerman 107). And not only the town, but himself. The comfort and security of home for Bowker is betrayed by an omnipresent unwillingness to listen, a gap he perceives due to his war experiences. Bowker circles the lake in search of a way to reenter “home” only to discover that it distances itself from him.

For Bowker, resolution may only come within confession—a scene he attempts to imagine several times, but fails to materialize, even imaginatively. Timmerman identifies Sally Gustafson and Max as one attempt; Norman’s father as a second attempt; and the final

confession at the drive-through as the only successful one (107-108). All three figures intersect within the larger character of the town. As Bowker drives in circles, his conversation loops and redirects around the town and its distinguishing (central) lake, which recurs as an image throughout the story and makes “a good audience for silence” (O’Brien 132). He contemplates confessing to the individuals he sees on his revolutions around the lake: he considers stopping at Sally’s house, disinters (imaginatively) Max’s body from the lake, honks at two young boys walking, and whispers at workmen (133, 138). Despite his efforts, Bowker glimpses a town stuck “as if in a stop-motion photograph, the place looked as if it had been hit by nerve gas, everything still and lifeless, even the people. The town could not talk, and would not listen. ‘How’d you like to hear about the war?’ he might have asked, but the place...had no memory, therefore no guilt” (137). War intrudes into the small-town American tableau in Bowker’s imagination: the peace around the town is instead an enervation; his inability to confess betrays the town’s refusal to listen; his inability to recognize, or escape, an intensive feeling of passing time means nothing to a place that recognizes nothing of the past.

The story culminates in a moment of witness; unheard and unarticulated, Bowker proceeds to a fast food drive-through where he is finally heard and validated—by a disembodied voice whose face and self are never revealed and who is heard because of its ability to listen<sup>18</sup>. Like Bowker’s tension against the town to which he attempts to speak, the fast-food drive-through represents another facet of suburban, peacetime American life. As Timmerman argues, the drive-through intercom, the only listener Bowker finds throughout the story, meets him halfway in its ironic use of “field communications from the war. The phrases clip out: ‘Affirmative, copy clear.’ ‘Rodger-dodger.’ ‘Fire for effect. Stand by.’ [...] The war reality is

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the third-person impersonal pronoun here is deliberate. No identifying information is lent to the fast-food intercom voice at all, including any reference to gender. It is, somewhat literally, stripped of all personhood.

reduced to a game” (Timmerman 109). Not only a game, but one with specifically domestic and commercial context. War is not only not “listened to” for the truth of its reality, but is reduced to commercial narrative for the purposes of selling hamburgers. If Timmerman concludes the language is “a game,” it’s one Bowker plays. After being asked to stand by, Bowker replies, “Out” (O’Brien 145). Bowker understands the real significance of those commands in the field, and his response is ambiguous in its tone and intention. The intercom has already gone dead; it is no longer listening. Yet Bowker engages American commercialism in its attempt to reach out and to speak his language: the language of wartime, co-opted and distorted in peacetime to sell the food of Americana. To return to Freud, the *unheimlich* is established within the *heimlich* here, and Bowker finds himself being met halfway.

The story never materializes. Bowker is unable to voice it. Even when confronted with the faceless, nonjudgmental, and encouraging voice from the intercom, Bowker proceeds as far as acknowledging that he has anything to say in the first place: “‘Well,’ he said, ‘how’d you like to hear about—’” (146). As the narrator then clarifies, “There was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would” (147). The shift in verb choice highlights the shift from ability to one of choice. Absent of anyone to tell his story, Bowker proceeds to walk into the lake, “[open] his lips, very slightly, for the taste” and watch the fireworks show for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July (148). The town and Vietnam exchange places; the lake constitutes middle ground. Entering the lake, Bowker reenacts the traumatic night of Kiowa’s death in the shit field in Vietnam that he cannot tell, which now takes place under cover of American celebration. The fireworks of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July stand in for the mortar shells of the field; it is the water of the lake Bowker opts to taste, as opposed to the inescapable shit of the field. Bowker enters the town through the cloud of Vietnam, just as the town enfolds Vietnam within its cultural coding.



Yet as “Tim” will confess in the story following, “Notes,” Bowker’s failure to tell his story and “Tim’s” failure to relate Bowker’s story effectively culminates in Bowker “[hanging] himself in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown” (149). As Susan Farrell writes, “Norman’s death almost seems to result from O’Brien’s failure to tell the story properly” (Farrell 19). Yet the interrelation between “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” suggests that the failure is larger than that of “Tim” as narrator. The failure to listen, and the failure to tell, may be attributed to multiple people: the town and the reader’s inability to hear the story of the returned, as well as “Tim’s” failure to hear his former comrade’s suffering. As Bowker writes “Tim” in his letter, “You were there—you can tell it” (O’Brien 151). But even “Tim” can’t. Bowker’s letter performs the work of estrangement for “Tim” himself, for whom the transition from war to peace was “a nice smooth glide” (151)<sup>19</sup>. Only through the lens of Bowker’s letter does “Tim” reflect and consider his own return to America, and his writing, as a process of reentry. Bowker’s struggle evidences the ways in which this reentry is destabilized by the individual subjects themselves. Originally central, shifted to margin, then returned, the soldiers neither integrate wholly into center nor margin. Having moved between the two, they now constitute a rupture to the dynamic altogether.

For *Oscar Wao*, dislocation goes beyond the question of reentering home to destabilize the concept of home. For Oscar, a return to the Dominican Republic presents an opportunity to validate his ethnic identity, but sacrifices his physical self to do so. Throughout the novel, Yunior defines Oscar’s personality in opposition to traditional cultural expressions of Dominican masculinity. As Yunior tells Oscar in college, “O, it’s against the laws of nature for a

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<sup>19</sup>The inclusion of “Notes” also estranges the narrative space of the text for the reader, for whom the narrative, offered at a mediated distance for consumption, information, and enjoyment, has no stakes. By following “Speaking of Courage” with “Notes,” there is an implication of the reader’s culpability within Norman’s death as well. The blame is disseminated and shared.

dominicano to die without fucking at least once. That, [Oscar] sighed, is what worries me” (Diaz 174). Oscar’s anxiety regarding his loss of virginity is positioned in relation to his claim to cultural Dominican participation. His personhood must be situated in intermediacy; marked as an ethnic other yet excluded from ethnic cultural ascription by his mannerisms, Oscar straddles the line between both. Once Oscar begins to establish a relationship with Ybon, his positioning with respect to cultural/national identity becomes more flexible. Upon suffering a beating from Ybon’s lover, Oscar disclaims any possession or claim to the Dominican Republic: “I didn’t do anything, Oscar quailed. Then he blurted out, I’m an American citizen” (295). Unluckily for Oscar, his assailants make a claim on his professed home nation. The capitán admits to being naturalized while one of the goons acknowledges that he “bought [his US citizenship] in Miami” (295). Oscar attempts to draw a boundary only to have himself be re-placed alongside those who he attempted to place outside of himself. The capitán identifies Oscar as a “malditoparigüayo,” which Yunior has previously identified as “a corruption of the English neologism ‘party watcher.’ [And in] contemporary usage, describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls” (20 FN). The use of the term, and its application to Oscar<sup>20</sup>, mediates between the two sites of Oscar’s identity by balancing American imperialism and Dominican cultural identity; while it originates as a Dominican term in resistance to American occupation, applying to individuals who are present but refuse to participate and choose instead to watch from the fringes, it bars Oscar, a Dominican-American, from full cultural identification with Dominican identity.

In Oscar’s subsequent returns to the Dominican Republic, his relationship to the Dominican Republic shifts, as does the narrator’s representation of Oscar’s behavior in the DR.

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<sup>20</sup>Yunior also inflects this with a third dimension by suggesting that it participates within his network of fukú as the term “would lead [Oscar] to another Watcher, the one who lamps on the Blue Side of the Moon” and who brings about his demise (FN 20).

Another inversion has taken place: the foreignness Oscar experienced when he first returned to the Dominican Republic instead transforms into a comfort in the Dominican Republic whereas his relationship to the United States has grown estranged. To return to Freud, the *heimlich* quality to the United States has been transformed to contain its opposite. Yet Oscar also locates the *heimlich* within the *unheimlich* of the Dominican Republic; despite its terrors, it also includes a feeling of the “strangely familiar,” a dimension of his mother’s experience in the Dominican Republic conveyed to Oscar himself (298). On the level of narrative, then, the reader also experiences a similar feeling of this *heimlich* quality in identifying an aspect of an earlier narrative thread and arc—that of Beli’s history—within its continuation for Oscar. The culmination of Oscar’s life’s work—loving a woman—joins his family’s narrative arc with his own; to return to the Dominican Republic enables the possibility of closure through the continuation (and, potentially, satisfaction) of the *fukú* placed upon his family, yet it also indicates that Oscar has successfully positioned himself within his homeland, solidifying his ethnicity, his gender, and his sexuality in one fell swoop. Oscar, as unplaceable rupture, integrates and yields to the structures (the Dominican Republic, masculinity) that contain him. When Oscar is seized by the henchmen a second time and beaten, he successfully performs Dominican cultural masculinity. Unlike his previous visit to the canefields, Oscar betrays no fear. He “didn’t cry when they drove him back to the canefields,” he “laughed a little too through his broken mouth” when an appeal is made to spare his life, he “tried to stand bravely” and began to speak, “[the] words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once” (320-321). In the wake of his impending death, Oscar greets it with atypical bravado. The use of “bravely” as a modifier, as well as the acknowledgment of the quality of his Spanish, vindicates Oscar as momentarily heroic and definitively Dominican. The homeland imbues

Oscar with a kind of power as he is absorbed into the larger narrative of fuku and family; as he faces his fate in the Dominican Republic (the patria), Oscar transforms into an icon of the *unheimlich* for the reader, bearing the hallmarks of Oscar's character description but vested with all of the hallmarks of a successful performance of Dominican masculinity.

Having glimpsed the sight of the heroic Oscar, Yuniór learns via the receipt of a delayed letter that Oscar managed to lose his virginity before he died. Yuniór's natural law of Dominican masculinity is upheld. Yet the presence and intrusion of this letter into the body of the primary narrative illustrates the continued disruption of form for the sake of clarification. "Truth" erupts in unstable moments and does so consistently. In contrast to the linear nature of the Archival narrative, the Amalgam is defined by its ruptures and fragments. In the disruption of their forms, both texts suggest that any attempt to recuperate the lost truth (or narrative) may fail in part because the witnesses themselves refuse to sacrifice narrative "wholeness and purity" for the fragments of truth that exist.

Traumatic images and narratives from the older generations lie in latency for the younger generations, surfacing as sudden and violent eruptions that enable an attempt at articulation and closure, which never successfully completes. Recursivity and a failure of articulation define the traumatic recovery process, and inform the mechanics of Yuniór's handling of the narrative. Events are alluded to and recur, symbols and visions repeat<sup>21</sup>, and the novel's organization continually interrupts itself in order to attempt to tell the story. Yuniór's revelations are deliberately and carefully parceled out, appearing first as rumors, suggestions, and forceful interruptions in the continuity of the narrative. The formal geography of the novel not only

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<sup>21</sup> Vargas also emphasizes the site of the canefield, where Oscar and Beli both suffer beatings, as one that joins the personal with the political-historical, and connects the long past with the present and continuous. Contextualizing the canefield within Dominican-Haitian relations, Vargas argues that their experiences in the canefield (particularly, Beli's) refers to a history that precedes both characters, one that "establish[es] intersectional resonances between the violence enacted on Beli, Oscar, and the slaves and laborers in the cane fields" (16).

models the fragmented geography of the Caribbean, but also incorporates the tactics of traumatic recovery and individual political subversion as well. Information is as tightly controlled by Yuniors as it is effectively deployed as propaganda by Trujillo, yet Yuniors's operations aim to limit any opportunity for the narrative of the de Leon family to be grasped as a unified whole. Instead, each fragment of the narrative must be received and decoded separately, before being joined to the others. Yet a complete understanding of their impact can only be realized by interpreting it alongside each other. The full weight of Yuniors's performance of masculinity that threads through the entire narrative may only be fully understood by contextualizing it against the story of Lola's adolescence and assault, Dominican cultural frames of masculinity, and the political-colonial relationship between the Dominican Republic and the United States, just as Tim's experience of war is contextualized against the suburban Americana of his childhood and adolescence, the death of a childhood friend from terminal illness, and the visual beauty of the battlefield.

This rupture ripples out to the unity of the text, affecting the dynamics of author, narrator, and text. This connection between authorial biography and character biography operates in service of the novels' missions to blur any distinction between truth and fiction. Diaz has referred to Yuniors as his "alter-ego," while being careful to maintain that while "Yuniors [shares] things in common...he *certainly* is not just a glossed [Diaz]" (Okie 1). Diaz, however, does not intend for his autobiography to inflect truth into the narrative, but rather to allow "the demands of fiction [to] transform the material" (Cespedes, Torres-Saillant, and Diaz 905). Rather than interposing fiction with truth, Diaz's aim is to emphasize the ways in which "a memoir is also a kind of fiction" (905). Structures of narrative codes are being upended with History, whether personal or political, then revealing its seams as a construction.

O'Brien goes further in emphasizing the blurred line between himself and his narrator by giving "Tim" his name and facets of his personal autobiography. The O'Briens share ages, origin stories, draft dates, and alma maters, but do not share children<sup>22</sup>. They share names, but not brothers-in-arms. In an interview with the *LA Times*, O'Brien stated that his decision to name his character after himself was "just for fun" because "[there's] a certain joy to it. [...] When you start telling lies about yourself—well, if you do it credibly, the reader is going to believe you" (Mehren 2). His use of the hybrid biography-autobiography encourages the reader to ascribe to the history he has constructed and to buy into the sagas of the characters he explores. John Young carries this further, analyzing the differences between O'Brien's revisions of *The Things They Carried*. By focusing on "How to Tell a True War Story," Young identifies that O'Brien's modifications to the story reflect O'Brien the author's own "struggle to record unsettled, traumatic memories and experiences in texts that are themselves materially unstable" (Young 2). In other words, even the Amalgam does not stand secure. Young links the metafictional aspects of O'Brien's novel to the work he performs outside of it, arguing that these revisions O'Brien makes engenders "counterfactual readings of the stories that have been published in contrast to those that might have been" (4). Alternative archives and alternative histories spring eternal. The narrator, constructed by the author, is equally splintered.

The ambiguity of this relation between Tim and "Tim" is mined to full potential in the exchange between "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes." In "Speaking of Courage," the reader is told of Norman Bowker's struggle to reintegrate into society following his return from the war. In "Notes," "Tim" reveals the construction of the previous story, acknowledging that it "was

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<sup>22</sup> See also Catherine Calloway: "Both the real and the fictional Tim O'Brien are in their forties and are natives of Minnesota, writers who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Macalester College, served as grunts in Vietnam after having been drafted at age twenty-one, attended graduate school at Harvard University, and wrote books entitled *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Going After Cacciato*" (Calloway 1).

written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown” (O’Brien 149). Mark Heberle argues that the dynamic between “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” enables “Tim” to finally lend voice to his own trauma. In its “haunting portrayal of persistent trauma...O’Brien comes [closest] to identifying himself directly with the narrator...who extends Bowker’s guilt to his own” (Heberle 205). Giorgio Mariani identifies “Tim’s” metafictional admittance in acknowledging his process of constructing the stories (Mariani 179). “Notes” inflects the fictional content of “Speaking of Courage.” As Bowker struggles with his failure to articulate his own trauma and be heard, “Tim” admits his failure in “Notes” that the story Bowker requested that he write “had been ruined by a failure to tell the full and precise truth about our night in the shit field” (O’Brien 153). This failure to tell on “Tim’s” part has deadly consequences.

O’Brien’s decision culminates in a confession at the end of the story. “Tim” acknowledges that “[in] the interests of truth, ...I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part...is my own” (154). Calloway calls attention to the revision history of this story, indicating that an earlier version involves Paul Berlin (in *Going After Cacciato*) lamenting his failure to rescue Frenchie Tucker (Calloway 3). She finds that “[such] shifts in character and events tempt the reader into textual participation” (3). In addition to enticing the reader to emotionally engage with the text, this movement blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. Is a short story entitled “Notes” a story, or a collection of notes on the story preceding (as it purports to be)? By positioning the stories alongside each other, the full force of the reader’s burden of narrative interpretation is made clear: to determine whether or not “Notes” constitutes a separate fictional story in its own

right or an addendum by the real Tim O'Brien will definitively establish which truth the reader endorses and whether or not, or where, blame needs to be placed. To believe in the truth of "Notes" as a real account lays culpability at Tim and "Tim's" feet for Bowker's death.

Additionally, "Tim's" seemingly public admittance of complicity in the deaths of his brothers-in-arms suggests the truth of his experience and aligns him as a sympathetic figure, in part because of the negative consequences of his actions. It maintains the continuing thesis of the book—that with silence and a refusal to listen comes catastrophic consequences.

Of course, none of this turns out to be true. As Calloway asks, "Can even this version be believed? Was there really a Norman Bowker, or is he, too, only fictional?" (3). As O'Brien confessed in an interview, Bowker too is fictional (Clark 1). However, the book is "lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company" with Bowker's name listed among the other characters, all of whom are also fictional (O'Brien *ded*). O'Brien's use of narrative voice and claims to truth as a device to inculcate reader trust, even and in spite of his admittances of direct fabrication, then negotiates the intermediating relationship with truth claims that his project seeks to accomplish. If a *NY Times* review admits disappointment "to find that Tim's...daughter is an invention," O'Brien's work of "telling" succeeds, even if the real truth is fictional (Bruckner 1). Witness is made real, albeit temporarily, with the possibility of redemption—as "Tim" seeks following Norman's suicide—coming alongside it.



## 5. RECONSTRUCTION

Despite the patchwork quality of the Amalgams they assemble, “Tim” and Yuniór attempt to force closure of traumatic experience when no such closure can be guaranteed. The narrators’ play with narrative form throughout the novels clashes with their grasping for full narrative closure at the end of their novels: while the structure of narrative promises a resolution, both novels struggle to present such a resolution within the space of their own traumatic quagmires. Examine, for example, the tacked on final chapter—“The Final Letter”—to *Oscar Wao*. By Yuniór’s account, a letter emerges from the Dominican Republic in time to complete Oscar’s trajectory of identity, establishing the end of his life as a triumphant moment of lost virginity. As Machado Saez writes about the ending of Oscar’s story, “Yuniór is instrumental in convincing the reader to accept this plot resolution, a romantic ending of consummated love. It is Yuniór who is responsible for narrating a foundational fiction” (Machado Saez 538). The “closure” offered for this multi-generational immigrant fiction turns away from the politics of totalitarianism and towards romance instead, providing closure by satisfying the primary goal of Oscar’s life. Or, as “Tim” chides one of his readers and, by proxy, the present reader, “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (O’Brien 81). “Tim” and Yuniór seize control over the only resource they have to implement this: the narrative, and, to a lesser extent, the response that it invites from its audience. Their attempts to represent full closure by the ends of their novels demonstrate the significant benefit of “telling” a story effectively and being heard—to utilize personal narratives to rehabilitate History for the marginal figures and, in doing so, restore them—however briefly—to the central frame. By telling a story properly, they suggest, you can then lay it to rest.

It is the process of storytelling that makes such a future possible. As Dori Laub frames it

in her study of testimony, testifying involves a commitment to truth, which is “a passage through, and an exploration of, difference” (Laub 73). For Laub, the “difference” is that which separates the living from the dead. For “Tim” and Yuniors, this difference spans truth and fiction, “home” and the not-home (whether the third-world battlefield, or the homeland made strange), personal and political, or historical and mnemonic. To tell a story and keep on telling it represents the complementary solution to the challenges of catastrophic History; rather than extending and postponing the timeline with which to experience and process a traumatic event, “telling” offers the potential for closure within a brief moment of rupture through an act of bearing witness, no matter how temporary, how forgettable, or how impossible to maintain. As “Tim” notes, to tell a story “was a way of bringing body and soul back together, or a way of making new bodies for the souls to inhabit” (O’Brien 226). In short, to generate a temporary “suturing” of the tearing of time in order to enable the margin to speak. By “raising the bodies,” the stories revive and vivify marginal experiences and perspectives, and enable them to play within and speak against existing central narratives of History. The dead soldiers of O’Brien’s Alpha Company may finally answer the silence of the officers. Norman Bowker may speak. As “humble Watcher[s],” the narrators seek to intervene in their “objective” tellings of events, but their control and exercise of power is, as the Watcher exemplifies, a momentary rupture and one heavily dependent on the other watchers—the readers/listeners, who may uncover the “true” story hiding among the official stories (Diaz 4, 92). A rupture justifies the telling, but a reader stages the ethics of listening.

This rupture opens a new potential horizon of recovery—not only for the characters within their stories (the men of Alpha company, dead and alive, estranged or familiar, or the remaining members of the de Leon family) but for the narrators themselves. As they tell these

stories, they reveal the extent to which they remain contained and sidelined by History. Employing their marginalized status within History, they intrude with a collage of testimony, documentation, and supposition fused into a kind of narrative. In the face of stable History, their Amalgam texts constitute archives of marginal rupture where truth intrudes, but never remains, where truth may be present even as it is never “absolutely true” (O’Brien 78). The narrators disrupt narrative form and utilize shifts in narrative voice to speak across a variety of registers, communicating marginal subjectivities across a multiplicity of centers and margins. The center is not the center, as Derrida argues, but neither is the margin of the Amalgam a fixed margin. For O’Brien and Diaz, the project of the Amalgam is a rehabilitative one, where the margin learns to speak through constructions in order to construct the central subject as the center speaks through deletions to identify the margin.

Stability in this project is not guaranteed; nor is closure. In contrast to the unified, linear contained apparatus of the Archive and its narrative, O’Brien and Diaz appear to work towards unity. Their structures are not unified, but rather composites of fragments, retaining all of their gaps and elisions. In this project, truth and fiction slot into the dynamic of center-margin and lose their stability as well. As “Tim” and Yuniór seek to balance the relation between center and margin within their relation of mediation and exchange, the center becomes less stable, threatening the order of the larger structure of truth it supports.

The marginal stories may never supplant or replace the central narrative, but that matters little to the narrators. What matters instead is the resurrection of the bodies, restoring the souls to bodies stripped of their ability to speak in order to lend them voice. It is “Tim, trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (233). It is Yuniór’s addition of triumph, celebration, and joy into Oscar’s life, fictional or extratextual as it may be. It is forcing witness to acts and “the brief,

nameless lives” that were never glimpsed and, perhaps, never even lived (Diaz *ded*). A lie, in revealing narrative choices and provoking reader engagement, exposes the seams of our relationship to those stories of History, as well as to our own narrative blinders, culturally, nationally, politically. A lie, as both novels work to show, may be the only way to prove the truth is out there, somewhere, and that it may someday be rescued, restored, and liberated—while working to rescue, restore, and liberate in its own right.

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