

Write My Way Out:

The Power of Words Against Erasure in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

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“Write My Way Out: The Power of Words Against Erasure in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.”

Since the days of the conquistadors, erasure has been an inherent facet of Dominican identities. Similarly, the pressures of immigrants to blend into United States culture and stifle their “otherness” only added to the silencing of Dominican-American identities when many were forced to flee the island nation under the despotic rule of Rafael Trujillo in the mid-twentieth century. In their novels, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez, respectively, explore the important roles that language has in both the stifling of identity and the overcoming of generations worth of forced silence. In this thesis, I explore how each author explores the importance of storytelling in reestablishing the presence of Dominican identities. Alvarez’s *García Girls* is told from a first-generation immigrant perspective and struggles to understand how two languages and national identities can coexist peacefully within a singular host. Her main character, Yolanda, faces pressures to conform from both external and internal sources. A generation removed, Díaz’s Oscar is not so much struggling to balance two opposing identities, but is instead trying to establish an identity amidst a generations-long legacy of violence and silenced voices. Just as Díaz’s characters benefit from and improve on the the efforts of the previous generation, so too does Díaz benefit from the efforts of authors like García. Novels like *García Girls* crafted a space in the American literary canon for later generations of authors to build upon. Both authors structure their novels in order to enhance the reader’s understanding of the obstacles that stand in the way of Dominican-Americans carving out a place for themselves. In *García Girls*, this is achieved through a reverse-chronological structure. Díaz takes the non-chronological structure a step further by vacillating between past and present. While the novels differ in terms of structure and theme, each emphasizes the same idea: the only way to understand the present is to understand the past.

Pick Up a Pen, Start Writing¹

When I was nineteen years old, I became obsessed with a little show called *Hamilton*. Very small following. Poor critical reviews. I'm sure you've never heard of it. Anyways, the musical tells the tale of an immigrant who, through the sheer power of his writings, is propelled from a tiny Caribbean island to the center of the American Revolution. You can understand how the story of a man who changed his own legacy, and the legacy of a nation, with mere words might intrigue a young English and Spanish major. It was this same premise of revolutionary language, approximately a year and a half later, which drew me to two other stories: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Both of these novels showcase the power of words in a world that often does its best to erase all that is different. In a nation that has completely removed practically any trace of Latin America from their textbooks, that has for centuries ignored the contributions of any historical figure who was not white and male, it is about time that other stories are told. In *Oscar Wao* and *García Girls*, the characters not only find a deeper understanding of their own identities through exploration of their pasts, but also begin to form a place for identities like their own in the literary canon and (North) American society alike. Since each novel begins in the present and then uses the past to contextualize, this paper takes a similar approach. I began with the most recent work, *Oscar Wao*, and then traced its influences back to the older *García Girls*.

Oscar Cabral-de Leon is everything that the established literary canon has trained readers not to expect in a hero. He is a fat, black, Dominican-American nerd. Much in the way of

¹ Miranda, Lin-Manuel. "Hamilton: An American Musical." *Hamilton: The Revolution*, edited by Jeremy McCarter, Grand Central Publishing, 2016, pp.209.

Each section of this paper is titled after a lyric in *Hamilton* for reasons which should become apparent later on.

Hamilton, he is fated to die rather tragically and violently. But also much like Hamilton, he leaves behind his legacy in the form of a collection of writings that have the potential to change the fates of generations to come. Told from the perspective of his friend/sometime roommate/sister's ex-boyfriend, Yuniór, the novel explores the "fukú" or curse which has supposedly been destroying the lives of Oscar's family for years.

Beginning in the years of Trujillo, the Dominican Republic's ruthless dictator who wreaked havoc on the Caribbean nation from the 1930s through the 1960s, the Cabral family curse can be traced back to Oscar's grandfather, Abelard. Abelard is an intellectual who dared to defy Trujillo. The dictator was known for his appetite for young, attractive girls. Most times, there was nothing these girls' parents could do to stand in the way of Trujillo's desires, but Abelard does just that when he refused to bring his adolescent daughter to government functions. This moment of rebellion is portrayed as the event which invites in fukú: an ancient curse with mysterious origins. It is easy to accept the idea that Belicia, Abelard's youngest daughter and Oscar's mother, may actually be cursed when looking at the events which follow Abelard's insubordination. Every single word written by him is destroyed. He himself is arrested and eventually killed. His wife commits suicide shortly after her husband's arrest. Their two older sisters are killed. The baby, Belicia, lives thanks to sheer neglect. Nobody cares about her for the first few years of her life. Her skin is darker than that of her sisters, and for that reason, none of her extended family wants to take her in. Belicia disappears from the record for about nine years. Eventually she reemerges, rescued from years of child labor by La Inca, the cousin of her father. That's not the end of her experience with fukú, tragically, because the girl has the deep misfortune of falling in love with Trujillo's brother-in-law: the Gangster. This might not be the worst thing in the world if the Gangster was not very much married to Trujillo's sister. In order

to escape the murderous wrath of the Gangster's wife, Belicia must flee to the States. Eventually, she marries and gives birth to Lola and Oscar, who inherit the bad luck gene.

As a teenager and, eventually, young adult, Oscar seems cursed in every aspect with invisibility. The nerdy, overweight, black Dominican-American is essentially an amalgamation of all of the things that both U.S. and Dominican society cast off and ignore. His search for love and identity takes him to the Dominican Republic in his early twenties. There, he finds himself reenacting some key scenes from his family's past. Like his mother, he is beaten at the command of his lover's other romantic partner. Much like his grandfather, he perishes at the hands of romantically-driven but politically-enabled violence. The key, however, lies in the ways that Oscar breaks from family tradition. Unlike his grandfather, the records of his thoughts are not completely erased. Oscar left behind traces of himself in the pages he wrote. Yuniors ends the novel with a message of hope: perhaps the discoveries of one generation can free the next. Oscar's many collections of words could be the antidote to fukú: zafa.

Much like Oscar, Yolanda García seeks explanations within the world of words. *García Girls* is told with a reverse chronological structure as the adult Yolanda uses the act of writing in order to better understand the past and, therefore, her identity. The second youngest of four sisters, Yolanda was born into a privileged family in the Dominican Republic. But then the girls' father, Carlos, throws everything into disarray when he makes one teeny tiny mistake. He crosses the wrong man. *The* wrong man of the D.R. in the 1950s: Rafael Trujillo. And so Yolanda and her sisters are catapulted from their lives of luxury, where they knew who they were and knew where they belonged, to the United States. Here, their lives are far less luxurious and any sense of belonging is eliminated. In the family's first years in the United States, Yolanda finds a

singular comfort: the English language. At first merely a tool to allow her to escape the hostility of her new country, English becomes the tool she uses to access and understand her new identity.

Similarly to how Oscar's life is lived in an undefined space, somewhere between fukú and zafa, Yolanda finds herself stranded between two identities (American and Dominican) which seem to exist only to invalidate one another. The moment Yolanda appears to be leaning more into one side of herself, she seems to lose touch with the other. You may ask yourself, why couldn't she just find a happy medium between the two? To this I would reply, great question. The problem with existing in the middle is that it is an undefined space. A grey area. Humans don't tend to love the grey areas. Everything is just so much easier when it is black or white, good or bad. The best kept secret in the United States is just how many of its citizens are living with very complex, multi-national identities. By keeping this secret, the culture sorts people into pieces: those that fit into the status quo and those which don't. Can you guess which pieces they encourage?

Yolanda looks at each of these pieces of herself and, because they do not add up to the impossible standard of an uncomplicated, purely American or purely Dominican person, she believes herself broken. In the childhood chapters, the breaks are largely represented in physical objects. Much like Yolanda's identity, the symbols begin as very concrete, easy to understand. But as Yolanda progresses through adolescence and into adulthood, the brokenness is more conceptual and complex. Rather than cope with broken dolls and piggy banks, Yolanda and her sisters must confront larger, more conceptual issues of identity, race, gender, and family. They are strong, complex women who are by no means "broken," but some factors in their lives, such as their relationships and mental health, have been broken down by repeated challenges to their identities.

When all aspects of his life appear to have broken down, when everyone around him is questioning the legitimacy of his political career, Hamilton vows to “write [his] way out.” It is not a perfect plan, to be sure, but it is a bold one, one which challenges the precedent. It allows him to take charge of his own narrative, even if the telling of it is often unpleasant. In the same spirit, Oscar and Yolanda refuse to allow the status quo to silence their own stories. They fight back against the giant erasers of U.S. society and Dominican history with their words. There is more told about the culture of a country in what they leave out of their textbooks than what they put in. If a story from the past is being silenced, then it goes to reason that those very same stories are being silenced in the present. Oscar and Yolanda refuse to accept this, instead embracing the great hope that, if they can find *just* the right words, they too can write their way out and into a sense of belonging.

Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story²

Oscar is cursed. Simple as that. Maybe it's hard to accept in a world of scientific fact, but it's true. Maybe the reader doesn't believe in curses, but by the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, they have to at least acknowledge that the dark forces working against him are far more difficult to stomach without some kind of superstition. These dark forces, whether man-made or of the spirits, are an amalgamation of several generations worth of misfortune, the product of a centuries-long³ cycle of erasure and searching. The reader need not journey farther than the introduction before Yunior gives a name to complex tradition of loss: fukú. According

² Miranda, Lin-Manuel. "Hamilton: An American Musical." *Hamilton: The Revolution*, edited by Jeremy McCarter, Grand Central Publishing, 2016, pp.280.

³ This tradition was founded, not in the erasure of Dominican culture in the U.S. or even the somewhat older history of Dominican culture erasing the Haitian diaspora which has crossed the border into their nation, but in the very conquering and founding of the Dominican Republic as we know (or don't know) it today. In less pretty but more honest language, it is the legacy of the kidnapping and enslavement of the African people who are the ancestors of the majority of Dominicans today. The very first sentence of the novel makes it clear that this history, this magic can be traced all the way back to the African heritage of the Dominican people: "They say [fukú] came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved..." (Díaz 1). In this, the line which introduces the reader to the story of Oscar Wao, Yunior is setting up the complex racial heritage of Dominicans and Dominican-Americans alike as a prominent theme of the novel. Fukú was created, he explains, in the very formation of the Americas, in the violence to which so many groups, Native Americans and Africans alike, were submitted. It is a legacy of pain created by the violations of colonists, perpetuated by the hate and continued violence which the origins of the country have fostered and despots like Trujillo have perpetuated. A connection to these silenced races, especially black slaves, is undesirable within many realms of Dominican society. In "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity" Silvio Torres-Saillant writes:

No matter how much ingenuity Afro-Dominicans may exhibit in negotiating inimical intellectual legacies, the fact remains that negrophobia has endured in the country and can still manifest itself in ways that interfere with the well-being of dark-skinned people...Blackness, then, continues to be relegated to the realm of the foreign in the land that originated blackness in the Americas."
(142)

Taking all of this history of violence and hate into consideration, it seems that fukú is a direct descendent of said history. That hate and fear may have evolved and appear changed at the surface level, but at its heart, at the heart of fukú, is this one horrific chapter in history.

to Yuniór, fukú takes on a number of forms and can explain most any misfortune to befall the Dominican people or anyone within a few degrees of separation from the Caribbean island. He feigns to leave room for doubt of such a superstitious concept, and then completely disregards said doubt.

Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family... It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions." In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you. (Díaz 5)

You can choose not to believe me, is what he is essentially saying, but fukú is part of the story regardless. The idea of fukú is presented as a superstition of a people, often overlooked by younger generations. But according to Yuniór, it cannot be denied. As the novel progresses, the reader, armed from the start with the knowledge of a family curse, is on the lookout for how it will manifest throughout the novel.

But have no fear! For where there is a curse, there is often a counter-curse. After all, who would the villain fight if there were no hero? Okay, so there's a hero, but what's that hero called, you might ask? Zafa. Zafa is the antidote, the arch nemesis, the constant hope. While fukú is running around, wreaking havoc, zafa is plotting a comeback. At the end of the rather bleak introductory chapter, Yuniór drops in just a shred of hope: "...there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers). Zafa" (Díaz 7). He is sure to emphasize that the cure is language. A

word. The idea that something as simple and everyday as human language could be the answer to magical dark forces gives magical properties to the ordinary. It makes a potential superhero out of the everyday nerd. Armed with unparalleled powers of language-morphing, Yuniór infuses his story with a kind of hope for which reader and character alike will search until the very last page. He states: “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (Díaz 7). The reader is alerted that fukú has been running the Cabral family show for generations now, but they are also given a sliver of hope to hold onto before plunging into the tale of Oscar’s search for identity in a world trying to erase him.

In the United States, the villain no longer takes physical shape but is instead disguised within the language and culture which surrounds newcomers the moment they cross the borders. Don’t be fooled. Just because fukú has shape-shifting powers doesn’t mean it isn’t there. What Díaz, through the narrator of Yuniór, makes immediately clear in the opening pages of *Oscar Wao*, is the shocking lack of knowledge of Latin American/Dominican history of the average inhabitant of the United States. To understand the root of the curse, to comprehend the forces of darkness working against the hero, the average U.S. reader needs a crash course in Dominican Republic 101. As it turns out, those high school “world” history textbooks forgot to print a few thousand pages.

If entire chapters of history are erased, how are the children of diaspora, first and second generation immigrants, to be expected to understand their own identity? To comprehend the contributions of their ancestors and the language that was wrapped up in the telling of it? Díaz often fights back against the U.S. compulsion to erase and assimilate with his own combat-by-language. Just as his characters do, he makes the act of storytelling his zafa. Though the story of Oscar and his family fukú is told largely in English, there is more than a light peppering of

Spanish slang and terminology present throughout the book. Take for example, this description of the ignored impacts of Dominican fukú on U.S. history:

For what Kennedy's intelligence experts failed to tell him was what every single Dominican, from the riches jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew: that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú so dreadful it would make the one that attached itself to the Admiral jojote in comparison. (Díaz 3)

Díaz unapologetically laces his English syntax with big chunks of Spanish. This unabashed breaking of linguistic norms is representative of the vein of anger and resentment which runs through the novel as a whole. Spanish is often suppressed in English language learners or bilingual children growing up in the United States. In this new world of words created by Díaz, the bilingual discovers new powers, powers monolinguals must envy as they consult their dictionaries and ponder phrases that can't be learned just from reading the menu at Chipotle. The unique language utopia created serves the dual-purpose of validating English language learners and bilinguals alike while taking linguistic revenge on the strictures of the English language and its promoters. In an interview regarding his unconventional code-switching (alternation between languages) throughout *Oscar Wao*, Díaz suggests a kind of grudge held against English, his second language. He views the push for English to supersede a person's native language in the United States as a form of "violence," a kind of violence he attempts to initiate from the opposite direction. Díaz's exact words say it the best: "When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back on English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English" (qtd. in Casielles-Suárez 482). In the United States, there is an

expectation, not only that immigrants learn the unofficial “official” language, but that they allow English to eclipse any other languages they may speak. The great human aversion to diversity strikes again and threatens to wipe out all that challenges the norm.

Everything that Oscar is, all of the seeming contradictions which he embodies, is considered undesirable and impossible to understand. The black, overweight, Latino nerd with no powers of flirtation is at first presented to the audience as a great cosmic screw-up. This character defies all stereotypes, makes it impossible to tell from a glance how he came to be all that he is. The attempts of many of his loved ones (often well-intentioned) and of society as a whole (far more contemptuous in nature) to “exterminate” in him all which defies the norm leads Oscar to believe that he has yet to discover the person he is meant to be. He tries to lose weight. He obsesses over girls and invests countless hours in attempts to win over several women throughout his life. As the novel progresses, however, the reader must ask themselves whether all these contradictions actually constitute a strength which empowers our protagonist to reach a greater level of understanding about himself and his destiny than any of his loved ones could. The greatest power Oscar possesses lies within his words, both the ones he writes and the ones he reads. His affinity for books and comics serve as an anchor for him within the Western world, as an escape from his life as an outcast, but also as way to connect to his history. Most members of Oscar’s generation, without his extensive background in fantasy, have a hard time accepting the idea of curses. Lola, for one, refuses to believe in fukú or curses, instead distancing herself from superstition and replacing it with the everyday, with the logical: “The curse, some of you will say. Life, is what I say. Life” (Díaz 210). Unlike his sister, who prefers to attribute the absurd and tragic to the hazards of life, Oscar is well versed in the fantastic. His status as a nerd and his fascination with Western fantasy may set him apart from other members of the

Dominican diaspora community of the States, but it is a major advantage in understanding things like *fukús* and *zafas*. In “The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic,” Tim Lazendörfer suggests that “[t]he roles of the outsider and insider are reversed; the Dominican American youths that His status as a nerd and fascination with Western fantasy may set him apart from other members of the Dominican diaspora community, but it allows him a greater connection with his roots than many of his peers possess” (138). In other words, Oscar’s obsession with fantasy allows him a connection to the supernatural past of the Dominican Republic that those unaccustomed to the genre could never even begin to fathom.

Fukú’s powers of erasure approach from all sides. Back in the Dominican Republic, it physically eliminates any trace of defiance. People are killed and tortured for words or actions against the powers that be. Books are burned. Entire families and their stories are lost from history. Oscar and his family may still be battling *fukú* in the U.S., but much like the Cabral-de Leons, its roots lie in the D.R. Various physical manifestations of this phenomenon arise throughout the novel, in particular in the appearance the man with no face who is present at both Belicia and Oscar’s cornfield beatings. The man first turns up when the police come to kill Belicia: “Déjame, she screamed, and when she looked up she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn’t have a face*” (Díaz 141). This alarming figure reappears when, in a near parallel event to his mother’s beating, Oscar is dragged out into the cane field for having committed the unforgivable crime of loving a person who was already taken. Desperately looking for someone to help him, Oscar is taken aback by the same faceless figure who appeared before his mother: “He stared out into the night...but there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face...” (Díaz 199). What might be worth

noting here is that in the first appearance of the faceless man, he is a part of the action, a passenger in the car with Belicia and the two other cops. But when he appears to Oscar, he is outside of the action, watching from afar, from his “ruined house.” In another novel it might be easier to deny the significance of this detail, but with an author such as Díaz, who takes great care to load each moment of a story with layers of meaning, this seems important. In Belicia’s time, the violence of the Trujillato was still very much a part of Dominican life. But when her son returns to the island, he is returning, not to the land of Trujillo, but to a land still reeling in the aftermath of the dictator. If we look at it this way, then the man can be interpreted as a symbol of violence in the Dominican Republic. In Belicia’s day it was more immediate. By the time Oscar gets there, it has taken a step back, but it is still lurking in the background.

We can reasonably assume that the man without a face is a manifestation of an inherited cycle of violence. His precise role is more debatable. As Christopher González in “Reading Junot Díaz” puts it, “Indeed, there is an evident link between personified blankness and trauma throughout Oscar Wao” (64). González goes on to note that “Díaz’s continual allusions to...instances of erasure, what he calls the *páginas en blanco*, remind the reader that there is always some aspect of Díaz’s fiction (and consequently, Dominican history) that keeps full knowledge just out of a reader’s reach” (65). Díaz intricately weaves together ideas of violence and erasure. In his narrative, at least, neither can exist without the other. That complex interweaving of good and bad, of guilt and victimhood, can be difficult to understand. It’s so much easier to know who to root for when the bad guys are just bad and the good guys are just good. If only real life were that simple. The man without a face both participates in the violence which is inflicted on Belicia and Oscar and serves as the doubles of these people who are about

to be erased themselves. He represents the two-sided nature of violence. Like most of the characters of both *Oscar Wao* and *García Girls*, he plays the roles of both eraser and erased.

If the man without a face represents a variety of factors which make up a fukú, then the recurring mongoose figure must surely be a manifestation of zafa. Like the faceless man, the mongoose appears at life or death moments for Belicia and Oscar. But the two are opposites in every way. The man appears at the onset of the violence; the mongoose emerges in the moments afterwards, in the moments before Belicia and Oscar decide to fight for life. The man is silent. The mongoose speaks. The man's silence is an act of complicity in destruction. The mongoose's words encourage the victims to fight back against the destruction, as they do in this scene after Belicia's beating:

...there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her.

You have to rise.

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.

Hypatia, your baby is dead.

No, no, no, no, no.

It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter.*

What son? she wailed. What daughter?

The ones who await. (Díaz 149)

Once more, in silence lies fukú, in words lies zafa. In other words, silence in moments of violence, as exemplified by the faceless man, can only allow the curse to continue. The only

defense against the terrible silence is words. The mongoose's words remind Belicia, and later Oscar, of the hope of the future. It reminds them of the wonderful things which exist outside of the period of agony in which they are currently living. The past may be full of curses, the present full of pain, but hope lies in the future.

In a way, the end of the novel is a "pick your own adventure" kind of deal. The reader can't see into the future of the Cabral-de Leon family to know which prevails: fukú or zafa. If the reader is to focus on what is lost, on the parallels between Oscar and his grandfather, then the family is doomed to live in an endless cycle of fukú. Much of the family's misfortune is attributed to the destruction of Abelard's writings which mysteriously disappeared following his arrest: "... none of Abelard's books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive. Not in an archive, not in a private collection. Not a one. All of them either lost or destroyed. Every paper he had in his house was confiscated and reportedly burned. You want creepy? Not one single example of his handwriting remains" (Díaz 246). So much history. Erased without a second thought. Had the Cabral descendants had access to Abelard's life works, to the words which compose their origin story, fukú might not have survived so long. Much as Abelard's writings were destroyed by the Trujillato, a similar collection of Oscar's own non-fictional compositions disappear. In the final months of his life, Oscar was in the Dominican Republic, researching his family and writing about his findings. But the pages, possibly even 300 of them, which contained said research are never delivered to Yunion or Lola after their author's death. One more thing gone missing in one family's plentiful history of missing things. All that is delivered is a letter to his sister, in which he excitedly tells her of the revelatory nature of his research, and "chapters of his never-to-be completed opus, a four-book E. E. 'Doc Smith-esque space opera called *Starscourage*" (Díaz 333). This kind of history repeating itself does not look

good for the ongoing struggle of zafa v. fukú. What must be considered, along with the similarities between past and present, however, are the differences. While the entirety of Abelard's works were destroyed, enormous portions of Oscar's remain (even beyond the space opera). If we've learned anything, it is that all of the hope for the future lies in what overcomes erasure. Belicia survived the destruction of her entire family. Oscar and Lola are the results of Belicia surviving her attempted murder in the cane field. So maybe what Oscar leaves behind could be the cure. Or at least a piece of it. So yeah, maybe fukú will continue to plague the family Cabral-de Leon. But that doesn't mean that zafa is giving up the fight.

So let's look at the alternative, more zafa-heavy ending, shall we? In this one, the one Yuniór dreams of, Oscar's writings are the key to it all. When Yuniór speaks of his hope for the end of the Cabral fukú, he speaks of the future. In this case, it is of the next generation. Maybe, maybe this time, this generation will be able to overcome all of the pain of the past. The representative, the hero of this generation is Isis, Lola's daughter. Yuniór's hope for Isis is that she will finally be armed with the proper zafa to defeat a multi-generational, multi-national fukú. He protects Oscar's writings for her with the kind of care that one might allot to an all powerful ring. One day in the future, he thinks, she will arrive in search of explanations. From there, he says, he will "take her down to [his] basement and open the four refrigerators where [he] store[s] her tío's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers...And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (Díaz 330). All that Oscar was is tied up in what he produced, and in all the fragments of his identity he left behind. In these refrigerators lies promise of a better future and of belonging. So much of Oscar and Lola and Beli's lives were spent searching. They sought explanations for their histories, for some

suggestion as to what their identity should or could be. The hopes which Yunior holds for Isis to break the pattern, to find zafa, lie not in how the disappearance of Oscar's work is similar to that of his grandfather. The hope lies in what is different. While the final revelations of Oscar Wao are unlikely to be seen by another living soul, so many of his other writings, so much of his legacy was *not* erased. For this continuation of Oscar's story, there is another hero to be acknowledged: Yunior. It is because he is alive to tell Oscar's story⁴ that a story exists at all.

Oscar said that his missing writing was the answer to everything. If that is true, if it is the only true and complete zafa, then the future is not quite as bright as Yunior would like to believe it to be. Much like most perfect solutions in life, this perfect explanation, this "Cosmo DNA" (Díaz 333) never arrives. Perhaps it was never completed. Perhaps it was destroyed by the people who killed its creator. Perhaps it was simply lost in the mail. Regardless, the whispers of a hope only half-delivered hangs over the final pages of the novel and therefore the question of how to mend a broken identity, how to make up for years' worth of erasure, is left unanswered. The reader is left stranded, as the characters are, somewhere between hope and doubt. It is left to Yunior to create his own ending. The one he writes is far from perfect. It suggests that the best to which we can aspire is progressively better endings. Maybe the next generation will be different. Maybe they are the zafa.

⁴ It is hard not to see Yunior as the Eliza to Oscar's Hamilton. He devotes so much of his energy to ensure that his friend's story is told properly.

I'm Erasing Myself from the Narrative⁵

Alvarez's *García Girls* takes place about a generation before *Oscar Wao* comes along and starts with messing with all sorts of crazy things like radical bilingualism and genre. It is this generational gap which makes all the difference in how the story is told. Yolanda, the protagonist of Alvarez's tale, is born in the Dominican Republic, is witness to the D.R. under the rule of Rafael Trujillo and is forced to flee to the United States. Oscar, however, is one step removed from this. Born and raised in the United States, he too is Dominican-American, but by this point, the hyphen between the two is no longer a divider so much as it is a conjoiner. The difficulties faced by Oscar in the United States are less to do with *finding* who he is and more to do with *justifying* who he is. For this reason, his narrative is more rebellious. He is pushing back against a set of expectations and traditions rather than attempting to find a set to define him. The strides to create those expectations, to produce a cultural identity within the United States is already established for him by people like his mother, Belicia, and Alvarez's Yolanda.

If Oscar is the hero, then Yolanda must surely be the origin story. Her tale tells of the first step of a hyphenated Dominican-American identity, when the hyphen did not unite, but served as a barrier so strong that a certain, nameless president would pay billions of dollars to reconstruct it. Raised for the first half of her childhood in the D.R. but the second half in the States, Yolanda's identity is divided between two nations. Between two languages. As Alvarez has often explained in interviews, many of the events and experiences described in this novel closely resemble her own struggles and discoveries as a Dominican-American. Much like her characters, Alvarez does not fit into a singular, easily defined box:

⁵ (Miranda 238)

I'm not a *Dominican* writer. I can't pretend to be *Dominican*. But by the same token, when people ask me if I'm an American writer, I have to say I don't think of myself as being in the same tradition as Melville or Hawthorne. I'm a hyphenated person interested in the music that comes out of the language that hears both languages. My stories come out of being in worlds that sometimes clash and sometimes combine. I'm a writer who is Latina and not a Latina who is a writer. (qtd. in Suárez 120)

Yolanda, much like the woman who committed her to the page, is a “hyphenated person.” She struggles to label herself in a world obsessed with labels. She has lived in America so long that she cannot identify singularly as Dominican. She is too Dominican to be simply American. She is not one thing, but many. Yolanda, like Alvarez, lives in a world created by both languages. It is not the living in this world, the understanding of two cultures which creates her problems, but the inability of others to understand that identities are not exclusive, but cumulative. This journey to discover her place of belonging hinders Yolanda/Alvarez from ever achieving the distinctive voice which is so prevalent in *Oscar Wao*.

If *García Girls* were a mystery—I know it seems like a stretch, but just play along for a moment—Yolanda would play the parts of the victim, detective, and thief. The case? The disappearance of her voice. To a writer like Yolanda, a voice is everything. As a woman of two languages, she has double the amount of words to choose from, which makes the whole process of finding her voice way harder. For most of the novel, for most of her adolescence and adulthood anyways, she seems determined to stifle the Dominican side of her identity. By doing this, she also kills off half of her storytelling potential. She is not without accomplices however. Much of U.S. culture, and especially Yolanda's U.S. boyfriends, convinces her that her second

identity is a liability. That it is standing between herself and an uncomplicated identity, relationship, etc. So she attempts to silence it.

The thing about her dual-sided identity is that the more Yolanda tries to silence one half, the louder it demands to be heard. In the opening chapter of *García Girls*, Yolanda is anxious to flee, not from any physical threat, but from the violence which living in the United States has inflicted on her sense of self. In retaliation, she has escaped back to the Dominican Republic and hopes to dispose of whatever remains of the second identity she built for herself in the States.

There is so much she wants, it is hard to single out one wish. There have been too many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them. But look at her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices. Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes. (Alvarez 11)

What she wants, more than anything, is a fresh start. A life without complications or hyphens. But there is evidence, from the moment she arrives, that Yolanda is no longer just Dominican. Her worldviews have been Westernized, Americanized, liberalized, etc. and there is no going back. Yolanda, refusing to be discouraged, continues her naïve hunt for the missing simplicity of her Dominican youth.

The hunt continues when Yolanda's aunt asks her what her *antojo*, her craving, is. Yolanda remembers the guavas of her childhood, seems to associate them with the sweet innocence and carefree nature of her youth, and decides in that instant that she must have guavas. She abandons any thoughts she may have had about following Dominican rules. She tut-tuts at her aunts who try to tell her that going out alone into the middle of a field to pick fruit is simply not something that Dominican women do. Yolanda's desire to resurrect an aspect of her youth

combines with her American sense of independence and off she goes. Not long into the journey, her car breaks down and she is forced to ask two passing men for help. Then, just like her car, her ability to communicate breaks down. For a moment, she forgets how to speak Spanish and is forced to resort to English. The men obligingly help with her car, and no harm befalls her, but they treat her as American rather than Dominican. In that moment, she must accept that the paradise of her youth died as soon as she stepped foot in the United States. Or perhaps she simply transformed it into a paradise in her memories. William Luis, in “A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*,” gives his perspective on the symbolism tied up in Yolanda’s search for guavas:

She cannot return to the past of her innocence, of Eve in Paradise, but to a life after that origin. Eve’s apple is the equivalent of Yolanda’s guavas; and if the apple forced Eve from paradise, the guavas will allow Yolanda to return to the past of her memory, which initiated her voyage to her origin...Although she is seeking a moment of innocence, that of her childhood, her arrival is already contaminated by the world of adults, the present, and North American culture, which she cherishes and which determines how she interprets the past. (Luis 846)

Associating Yolanda with Eve reframes the Garcías’ flight from the D.R. as a sort of casting out from Eden. In Yolanda’s mind, life was easy and simple on the paradise of the island. There, she knew who she was. In moving to the United States, in learning English and accepting American customs, her childhood innocence shattered, along with the simplistic identity which was tied up in it. Try as she might, she cannot put them back together as they once were.

This idea of broken things being impossible to mend is demonstrated once more in a scene from Yolanda’s childhood in the D.R. When her cousin Mundín’s human anatomy doll is

dropped and stepped on, the children attempt to put it back together again. Unfortunately, “...most of the organs had been chewed out of shape by the dogs or bent by my aunt’s stepping on them. We couldn’t tell the blue kidneys from bits of lung or the heart from a pink lobe of brain, and though Mundín and I tried using the diagram, there was no puzzling the whole back inside the little man” (Alvarez 237). Though all of the pieces of the original doll remain, each of these pieces have been irreversibly changed. They no longer fit together as they once did. Similarly, after moving to the States, Yolanda is still Yolanda, but not in the same way that she was before. Her pieces have been morphed by a new language, by a different culture, by the crushing pressures to conform to a new normal. She must learn to live with what remains: a two-part jumble of an identity that adds up to a more complicated whole.

The attacks on Yolanda’s identity begin almost as soon as the family reaches the United States. Compared to their cushy lives in the Dominican Republic, the level of resistance met by the Garcías in their new country is jarring. Instead of living in the family compound where they had a number of best friend cousins to play with, they are met with hostility from their new peers. This, the first period of attack on Yolanda’s identity in a series of many, does lead to a new development in how she defines herself. That is to say, it leads her to words: “...she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (Alvarez 141). For Yolanda, English is a refuge where the harsh pieces of the outside world are muted with each turn of a page. So begins her tendency to view her worlds as separate. Spanish divided her from her new life. English is her way in. Part of her inability to accept both sides of her identity starts with her (often necessitated) alienation of one language in favor of the other. In a story where words hold so much power for healing, the abandoning of any words severely weakens the power. But Yolanda has only just begun

establishing her relationship with her new language when that too is, quite literally, ripped from her grasp.

Things are just beginning to look up for the middle-school-aged Yolanda. She is finally settling into her American life. Her passion for English has not only helped her to fit in, but has allowed her to stand out—in a positive way this time. She is asked by her school to write and perform a speech in honor of the teachers. While her mother applauds her workmanship, her father ultimately destroys Yo's essay because it questions authority, a deadly move in Trujillo's Dominican Republic. More importantly though, the speech is destroyed because in creating it, Yolanda has revealed herself to be partially American:

“[...] Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining force with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women. He leapt from the bed, throwing off his covers. The Spanish newspapers flew across the room. He snatched the speech out of Yoyo's hands, held it before the girl's wide eyes, a vengeful, mad look in his own, and then once, twice, three, four, countless times, he tore the speech into shreds.” (Alvarez 145-146)

Yolanda just can't win. Her Dominican-ness, her Spanish, makes her stand out in school. Her attempts to become more “American” are punished for breaking from Dominican norms. The destruction of her speech suggests that there is no area of Yolanda's life which is unaffected by a history of violence and fear. She is forced to leave the D.R. because of it, but the violence comes along with her. In “Imploding the Miranda Complex in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*” Jennifer Bess writes, “[...] the losses and silences are irrecoverable, in part, because the cycle which generates them persists” (89). The legacy is indeed cyclical throughout the novel. Without a doubt, the family are victims of violence in both the Dominican Republic

and in the United States. The form of it may differ, but it is violence nonetheless. This prolonged experience with fear changes the way they interact with the world. They are doomed to perpetuate the cycle. No one is safe from being the victim *or* the cause of it. Not even Yolanda.

It is actually in the earliest⁶ chapter of Yolanda's childhood in which her dual-role in the cycle of forced silence is revealed. Not only has she been silenced by others or silenced pieces of herself, but it turns out that she too is responsible for erasing other voices. When she is a child, still living in the D.R., Yolanda discovers a litter of kittens in a shed in the family compound. She wants to take one of them, a tiny black kitten that she names "Schwarz."⁷ She is warned against taking the fragile kitten away from its mother so soon, but does so anyways. In a continuation of her careless behavior, she places Schwarz inside her toy drum and beats the instrument from the outside. Pursued by the mother cat, she finally sets the kitten free. But too late. The damage has been done: "Its little human face winced with meows. I detested the accusing sound of meow. I wanted to dunk it into the sink and make its meowing stop. Instead, I lifted the screen and threw the meowing ball out the window" (Alvarez 288). In many ways, she is represented in the fate of the kitten, yanked away from her home by force. She is cast out into the world and given no tools for survival. It's important to note though, that she is not only the victim here, but the villain as well. When confronted with the results of her own participation of violence, Yolanda desperately wants to erase any trace of the memory. She is willing to condemn

⁶ By "earliest", I mean chronologically. The novel is actually set up in a reverse-chronological order. So, if we are talking about the structure of the book, it is actually the *last* chapter.

⁷ This also signifies Yolanda's privilege in the Dominican Republic, as "Schwarz" is the name of the American toy store from which her wealthy grandparents often bring gifts. With privilege often comes a sense of entitlement. By reminding the reader of this power that young Yolanda possesses, Alvarez connects power with responsibility for those weaker than the self. Therefore, Yolanda (inadvertently) serves as a stand-in for the government, Trujillo especially, that winds uprooting *her* life and removing her from her home.

an innocent life to death in order to erase any evidence of her own participation in the violence. Years later, in the United States, Yolanda is repeatedly awakened by dreams of the mother cat, meowing accusingly at her, forcing her to take responsibility for her actions. As Bess points out, “She suffers the same fear that causes her father to tear up her Teacher's Day speech and responds the same way: by denying voice. She joins her ancestors and her father in the legacy of oppression: as she will blame him for his tyrannous behavior, now she blames herself for an act which also involves the silencing of her victim” (99). Just as her father does, just as Trujillo does, Yolanda chooses silence rather than listening. Silence is the simple fix. That’s why it’s so enticing and dangerous. Had she listened to the mews of the kitten in the first place, Yolanda would have had to face her conscience. She would have had to deny her desires. Listening is so much harder than inflicting silence. Sooner or later, though, listening is inevitable. The mother cat represents the voices of so many erased voices, silenced for so long, but now demanding to be heard.

In the U.S., the battle between silence and words persists. By the time she reaches young adulthood, Yolanda is once again trying to silence a voice. Only this time, it is her own. More specifically, it is the Dominican side of herself she is trying to extinguish. What motive might she have for doing this? Well, there are a number of factors, but perhaps first on the list of suspects is Yolanda’s boyfriend, later husband, and all around problematic guy, John. John serves only to amplify whatever negative feelings Yolanda may have harbored towards her Dominican identity. While turning his girlfriend/wife against a piece of her heritage is probably not his intent, it is the result nonetheless. He proves himself to be the instrument of North American disdain for outsiders, insisting on calling Yolanda “Joe”: an Americanization of the already shortened nickname “Yo.” The worst betrayal comes when he refuses to accept the

rhyme she creates for her own name as they lounge about constructing poetry. Yolanda argues that the rhyme, “sky” and “Joe”, works in Spanish, where sky is “cielo” and Joe is “Yo”(Alvarez 72). He scoffs away her argument and, by extension, at the portion of her own identity which is wrapped up in her first language. This attempt to separate her from her first language only causes her to desire it more and she takes refuge from his linguistic violence in Spanish: “And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried” (Alvarez 72). It is Yolanda’s ability to exist in two worlds simultaneously, to allow herself and her words to flow seamlessly back and forth, that proves a challenge in her marriage. Her insistence on the possibility of bilingual rhymes is met with hostility by her husband. Eventually, the differences between Yolanda and John amplify and Yolanda breaks off the relationship. When asked for her reasoning, she responds simply: “We just didn’t speak the same language” (Alvarez 80). In this simple statement, Yolanda boils a number of cultural and marital issues down to a singular problem. The novel calls it “simplifying” (Alvarez 80), but John’s inability to embrace Yolanda’s relationship with two cultures is indeed at the core of what dooms their marriage.

Yolanda gets out of the marriage, but not before internalizing a lot of John’s intolerance for her first language. The moment that the external force to push back against is removed from the equation, she is at war with only herself. It is her Dominican side which has been fighting for recognition for years against the side that wants to fit in. She tries for years to silence large portion of herself, as though it were possible to smash a part of a doll without destroying how the entire thing fits together. Finally, all of the ripping herself apart from the inside catches up with her. As she loses touch with herself, with the core of her ability to define and express herself, she loses her voice. Years worth of self-doubt result in a breakdown of her relationship to language,

any language. Yolanda seeks treatment in a psychiatric hospital. Throughout the chapter, she must reestablish her relationship with language. Her words are depicted as harmful, a vicious black bird, an allergy.

“*Love,*” Yo enunciates, letting the full force of the word loose in her mouth. She is determined to get over this allergy. She will build an immunity to the offending words. She braces herself for a double dose: “*Love, love,*” she says the words quickly. Her face is one itchy valentine. “*Amor.*” Even in Spanish, the word makes a rash erupt on the backs of her hands. (Alvarez 85)

She must painstakingly reform her relationship with her words, both English and Spanish. Unsurprisingly, it is love, both a love for words themselves and the actual word “love,” which help Yolanda find her voice once more. In “Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation” Lucia Suarez states that “This breakdown forces her to negotiate her two languages and a complex identity that is not referenced in any of the ‘Great British Literature’ she has made her own” (127). Yolanda is a poet and an English professor, but English is not enough to fully define her. She is raised in two lands, in two distinctive societies, and that sort of cultural depth is impossible to describe with merely one language. As she has grown up, Yolanda’s languages have grown with her, intermingling so as to be inseparable. To cut one down is to obliterate all of her language skills.

Hold up. Record scratch. This is all starting to sound very familiar.

Rewind.

Rewind.

*Rewind.*⁸

Now do you see what was happening in that first scene with the guavas and the broken down car? Yolanda had spent so much time attempting to silence her Spanish, her Dominican-ness, that she overcorrected. In her return to the Dominican Republic, she tried to only indulge the Spanish and shut down the English. Again, events conspire to prove that she cannot just shut down pieces of herself on command. The entire thing blows up in her face when it is only her English that she can access. She set off on a misguided search for her *antojo*, her deepest desire for belonging. Instead, she discovers the life she remembered no longer exists for her. She is now a “hyphenated person,” a woman with two homes and two identities that sometimes have a hard time getting along with one another. By writing the novel, Yolanda attempts to write her way out of confusion and towards some form of understanding herself. Slowly, in a manner that only storytelling can allow, she unravels her identity from the present to the past in order to better comprehend the root of the problem. This pursuit leads her down a number of trails, past relationships, and typewriters, and broken dolls. The patterns of violence are slowly revealed, peeled back like layers. With each layer, a fuller explanation develops as to *how* Yolanda came to have the complicated relationship with words that she does in the first chapter. That said, it is the manner in which the story is told that is far more revealing than any broken car or kitten. Yolanda chooses to tell her story, almost entirely, in English. Sure, there is the occasional “antojo” or “cielo” thrown into the mix. It is almost always apologetically, though, with plenty of explanation. She is still catering to the monolingual audience. She is still trying to morph herself into what the world around her wants her to be: simple, singular, sin complicaciones. She may

⁸ If you have never seen *Hamilton*, I’m sure this looks like some very odd structuring. I apologize. Not for the structuring, but for the fact that you have never had the pleasure of seeing *Hamilton*.

achieve a better level of understanding, but she never reaches acceptance. What Yolanda has done, however, is lay a foundation for the Oscars and the Yuniors of the world to come in with a better understanding of the violence that silences. She has laid the ground work that will allow future hyphenated people to pepper their English with Spanish with absolute glee and zero apologies.

History Has Its Eyes on You⁹

After reading Diaz's and Alvarez's novels, I knew that these were the books about which I wanted to write. They shared comparable themes and similar approaches to time, family, and identity in their exploration of the individual. For just a moment, it seemed that all of my problems were solved. Alas, life is rarely so simple. It became quickly apparent, as soon as I began to brainstorm approaches to the novels, that I still wasn't entirely aware of the big picture. Here were these marvelous themes that lined up so well. Yet, there I was, completely lost in a sea of ideas. It took several months and one completely random Netflix choice to solve that problem.

“But where are our contributions? Where are they? Where are they listed, mentioned or honored? Can you imagine? Can you imagine if they were put back into history? Written back into history textbooks? Can you imagine how America would see us? More importantly, can you imagine how we would see ourselves?” (Leguizamo 1:22:51-1:23:14). These are the questions that John Leguizamo asks at the end of his comedy special, *Latin History for Morons*, in which he reproduces the year of his life in which he tried to help his son discover a Latin hero for a history project. And that is when the blindingly obvious point of the story hit me. These characters were not only using literature to work through the trauma of their own pasts, or even the trauma of their families' pasts, they were also attempting to better understand the ongoing and cyclical mass extinction of a culture and of a people. With their words, they were attempting to put themselves back in history.

⁹ Miranda, Lin-Manuel. “Hamilton: An American Musical.” *Hamilton: The Revolution*, edited by Jeremy McCarter, Grand Central Publishing, 2016, pp.120.

In the final minutes of the performance, Leguizamo reenacts his son's eighth grade graduation speech, in which the pivotal moment in which his son reveals that he has picked himself as his hero (1:26:39-1:28:45). He, like Yolanda and Oscar, is the product of a rich history of warriors and innovators and philosophers, each heroes in their own right. His act of heroism is in overcoming the invalidation of the Latinx identity in the United States. It is in discovering the importance of telling his own story and discovering how revolutionary that act can be. Yolanda and Oscar, who retrace their own steps and the steps of their predecessors, are taking on a mountain of responsibility—the responsibility of telling their own stories, fighting against the opposing armies that would erase them. They are rewriting a more complete and comprehensive history and, in so doing, are becoming a new genre of hero.

Hamilton begins by asking the audience “How does an immigrant [...] grow up to be a hero and a scholar?” (Miranda 16). How does an outsider carve out a big enough space for themselves within a hostile culture to leave an incredible impact? These are questions that Alvarez began to consider and Díaz ventured to answer. The power of these outsiders, of Hamilton and Yolanda and Oscar, is in their relationship with language. They start with what they know and write through all the parts that they don't. They write with a hunger, as though, if they pour enough thoughts onto the page, all of the answers will eventually be revealed to them, scribbled out in their own words. None of these three characters ever quite accomplish a sense of total belonging or even understanding. With each generation, however, there is improvement. This improvement invites a hope for a better future that is present in countless immigrant stories. It binds together hundreds of thousands of stories, becoming increasingly louder in the literary canon. So maybe there is hope that one day one of them, or all of them together, will write their way out of cultural erasure. They'll write their way out of a history of violence and silence that

has conspired to remove entire societies from the global consciousness. They'll write their way out.

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