The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao employs various semi-supernatural elements to recount the life of Oscar de Léon, the dominant of these being “fukú americanus,” or, “the Curse and the Doom of the New World”.¹ Fukú unifies the narrative in much the same way that it unifies the Cabral family, and, on a larger scale, all oppressed peoples. In this paper, I offer an explanation of what fukú represents, borrowing in part from Gonzalez’ understanding of fukú as a power dynamic that prescribes certain realities. However, I offer fukú as less of an explicit exertion of power, as is Gonzalez’ position, and more as a function of narrative construction and reconstruction in the lives of those who are subject to such power. In this paper, I will argue that fukú is at work in the lives of Dominican people when they enter into an acceptance that their misfortune, imparted on them by such executions of power, is inevitable and enduring. To do so, I will first describe the nature of the curse in the novel before outlining briefly the arguments of Bautista and Gonzalez regarding the symbolism of fukú so that I can establish firmly a conceptual basis on which my own interpretation will rest. I will then describe the realities that such power exertions create and to which Dominican people are uniquely subject in order to ultimately arrive at my conclusion that fukú is a resignation to these realities.

Scholarship agrees that fukú is vindictive on multiple levels. First, on the global level, fukú is born of white colonial contact with

the Caribbean. It also functions on an intermediate level within the Dominican Republic through Trujillo’s dictatorship and the violence it imparts on its people. Finally, fukú operates on the local level by resembling everyday bad luck and superstitions. For example, fukú is cited as the reason Yunior’s “twelve-daughter uncle in the Cibao … believed he’d been cursed by an old lover to never have male children.” Additionally, from this local standpoint, fukú also has a genealogic effect. Fukú is not only “in the air” at any given time and on any given level, but it also works its way through family trees. Fukú is positioned as a broad, ambiguous curse that exerts itself in any number of ways in any person’s life. However, because Díaz keeps the nature of fukú ambiguous in the novel, an understanding of what fukú ultimately represents requires a more thorough investigation. One such investigation claims that Oscar’s growing belief in fukú as the novel progresses is reflective not only of his growing pessimism but also a reconnection with his Dominican roots, thereby equating fukú with historical and cultural rootedness. Another takes a broader approach, suggesting that fukú is a function not of cultural connectedness but of power; specifically, that it is a “novelization” of the ways in which power in the postcolonial world is exerted on the lives of those living in it. In particular, such power is exerted to create capitalistic, heteronormative, and misogynistic realities.

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3 Díaz, Brief Wondrous Life, 5.
4 Ibid., 2.
7 Melissa M. Gonzalez, “‘The Only Way Out Is In’: Power, Race, and Sexuality Under Capitalism in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.”
According to Bautista, Oscar’s belief in fukú is parallel to his fascination with science fiction and fantasy, and it ultimately becomes the vehicle by which Oscar reconnects to his Dominican roots. At the start of the novel, Oscar is disinterested in fukú precisely because he is a “hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man.”

8 He views his literary interests (or, his “genres,” as they are called) as irreconcilable with a belief in fukú. Tellingly, the first time he travels to Santo Domingo he writes two fantasy books but does not bother to learn anything about his family’s curse, which is distinct from his second trip to Santo Domingo later in his life. 9 However, as the novel progresses, Oscar’s initially limited engagement with fukú becomes more expansive. He cites it as the reason for his attempted suicide and insists to Yunior that it is as much a part of their lives as it that of their parents’. 10 Bautista attributes this growing belief in fukú to Oscar’s growing pessimism about the world, but, as my argument will later illustrate, I propose Oscar to become less pessimistic as the novel continues. Therefore, I subscribe more to Bautista’s second argument, which is that Oscar’s growing belief in fukú is “an important reflection of his reconnection to his Dominican roots.” 11 During his second trip to Santo Domingo, he does not conceal himself in his room to write science-fiction but is instead “consumed” by an investigation into the ways in which fukú affects his and his family’s life; namely, in terms of Abelard’s downfall. It is also “strongly suggested” that Oscar writes a book explaining fukú as it works within his family. 12 What this argument leaves incomplete is the function of fukú through a lens broader than Oscar’s individual interaction with it, which would lend itself to fukú as a function of narrative rescripting on a cultural level. Gonzalez comes closer, maintaining that fukú is a sort of Foucauldian power, and that this power exists on a global, intermediate, and individual level.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid, 49.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
To Gonzalez, fukú is the exertion of power on its subjects. Trujillo, for example, facilitates fukú in his oppression of the Dominican people through physical violence and casting a “shadow of fear” over the region. Additionally, fukú is also exerted through ideological dominance, for Trujillo’s subjugated people live in a world of not only genocide and torture but also of a “hypersexual, violent masculinity” which takes shape in the lives of Dominican people as the “normative form of Dominican masculinity.” Such hypersexuality is what Gonzalez refers to as the “internalized effect” of Trujillo’s own behavior, and it persists through generations. Therefore, fukú is power exerted both physically, through mass genocide of the Dominican people, and ideologically, through the prescription of normative behaviors. Moreover, exertion of power is not limited to those who explicitly wield it (namely, Trujillo), for ideological fukú is perpetuated by the subjects themselves, as well as their descendants. Gonzalez notes that it is for this reason that Díaz never makes clear the divide between those who are fukú’s facilitators and those who are its victims, for “fukú conditions all lives as an internalized force” and “we all reproduce the same oppressive forces that shape us.” As Lola laments near the end of the novel, “Ten million Trujillos is all we are.” I would like to harvest this notion of fukú as the perpetuity of ideological power exertion to construct my argument that fukú, more than merely the realities that such an ideology constructs through its subjects, is instead the subjects’ resignation to these realities. Throughout the novel, fukú is cited when one is in the presence of misfortune. I propose that fukú, more than the misfortune itself, is the acceptance of this misfortune as being unchangeable. It is the belief that one’s narrative is stagnant, and that things as they are will always be as they are. Such cultural realities to which Dominicans are subject and believe are fixed are best displayed in Oscar Wao through gendered prescriptions, though each character also has their individual misfortune within this framework.

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 280.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 282.
18 Ibid, Díaz, Brief Wondrous Life, 324.
As Gonzalez notes, a primary means by which ideological power constructs narratives in the novel space is through a prescription of “hypersexualized, violent masculinity” for Dominican males.\(^\text{19}\) This prescription originates in its embodiment in men of power or influence. Early in the novel, for example, Díaz offers Porfirio Rubirosa, Trujillo’s son-in-law and confidante, as the archetype of Dominican maleness. In addition to being attractive—a “tall, debonair prettyboy”—he is also sexually charged—“the original Dominican Player, fucked all sorts of women.”\(^\text{20}\) Trujillo is another person of power revealed to be both the archetype and architect of such narrative prescriptions. As a ruler whose dictatorship sustains itself through the personality cult it engineers,\(^\text{21}\) Trujillo’s behavioral conduct trickles down into the lives of the Dominican people. His violence toward women, in particular, engenders the behaviors and attitudes toward women characteristic of Yunior and the rest of the young Dominican boys in the novel. Just as Trujillo sexualizes and objectifies women (he pursues “every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women”),\(^\text{22}\) so too are attitudes toward women among Dominicans in New Jersey similarly sexualized and objectified. In this way, the prescription for this Dominican brand of masculinity originates in people of power and exerts itself as a construction of reality for those within the culture over which it has influence.

Yunior is an apt example of how this ideological narrative construction is embodied in the people of a culture. As an archetype of Dominican masculinity, he prides himself in having “playerly wisdom” that he can use to help Oscar in his romantic endeavors.\(^\text{23}\) He interprets his world in terms of the women around him; in particular, their bodies. He is also chronically unfaithful to Lola, arguably the only woman in any of his sexual or romantic endeavors whom he truly loves.\(^\text{24}\) Oscar, on the other hand, is the antithesis of such “playerly wisdom.” Overweight and acne-ridden, he “had none

\(^{19}\) Gonzalez, “Power, Race, and Sexuality,” 281.
\(^{20}\) Díaz, Brief Wondrous Life, 12.
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 2
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Ibid, 173.
\(^{24}\) Ibid, 313.
of the higher powers of your typical Dominican male”. He is chided by his uncle for being a “pariguayo,” or party-watcher, and though he continues to be a “passionate enamorado,” his romantic pursuits are always unreciprocated. The prescription of masculinity exerts itself upon both Yunior and Oscar equally, the difference between the two being that Yunior embodies the prescription successfully, while Oscar does not. As such, and as a testament to the weight of these prescriptions, Oscar is plagued by the fact that he does not embody Dominican masculinity as Yunior does.

The misfortune of this prescription of masculinity is that it imprisons the Dominican male into a particular way of being, allotting no leeway in terms of personal presentation other than what is normative. When Oscar asks Yunior why he cheats on Lola, he replies, “If I knew that, it wouldn’t be a problem,” implying that has little insight into why he behaves the way he does but is instead moved by the culture toward his way of being. Oscar is berated by his peers and ostracized from his Dominican identity for his failure to meet these standards, and Yunior’s friends tell him, “Tú no eres nada de dominicano.” Additionally, Oscar asks of Yunior, almost out of fear, “I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin. You who have experience in these matters—do you think this is true?” To which Yunior replies, “It’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once.” The cost of admission into the Dominican cultural narrative is, at a minimum, that these standards for masculinity are met. Yunior, who meets the standards, is imprisoned by them and behaves according to them, and Oscar, who does not, is locked out of his cultural narrative. Likewise, Dominican masculinity also holds that the role of women is ultimately one of sexual utility to men, and this functions as a similar narrative prison, creating a narrative reality unique to the Dominican people.

27 Ibid, 23.
28 Ibid, 313.
29 Ibid, 180.
The Dominican woman, by and large, is objectified and sexualized by the men around her for their benefit. In much the same way that Trujillo is both the archetype and architect of the cultural narrative of Dominican masculinity, prescribed attitudes toward women from a cultural standpoint can also be traced back to him. Any woman in the Dominican Republic during his dictatorship would have been subject to his sexual advances, thus fostering the predatory, objectifying attitude toward women characteristic of the Dominican people: “In Trujillo’s DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she’d be mamando his ripio like an old pro and there would be nothing you could do about it!”³¹ Women’s bodies are also held to a cultural ideal, and what is most essential for women’s imprisonment to their cultural prescriptions is that their value is determined by the extent to which they are a means by which male status can be attained. Trujillo’s “thousands upon thousands upon thousands” of women are the ultimate demarcation of his position of power.³² Such a prescription is likewise enacted and perpetuated by the people within the culture; for example, much of Oscar’s distress with respect to not having a woman has to do with what it connotes of him and his male status. The club Oscar joins in college, RU Gamers, boasts an “entirely male membership,” signaling that his attempts to integrate himself within a community have once again left him female-less and thus, emasculated. Here, the narrative prison exerts itself onto Oscar, whose failure to embody the prescriptions set forth by Trujillo leaves him rejected from the Dominican narrative, and also the women in whom he is romantically interested, who are held hostage to the notion that their utility is, in part, to serve as a demarcation of status for men around them.

Female characters in the novel understand this narrative prescription and behave accordingly. For example, in her youth, Beli “without question” wants nothing more than that which has been culturally established to make her existence worthwhile, which is to say, a “handsome wealthy husband … and a woman’s body.”³³ The development of her breasts signifies her entrance into this narrative,
and it is at this point that she understands that she can use sex as a tool to get what she wants, which is, on one hand, the Gangster’s attention, and in another, his money.\textsuperscript{34} However, consistent with other characters in the novel, Beli yearns to be free from the confines of Santo Domingo yet does not see freedom as a rational possibility.\textsuperscript{35} This duality is perhaps best exemplified in an exchange with Constantina in which Constantina tells her, “Every desgraciado who walks in here is in love with you. You could have the whole maldito world if you wanted.” Yunior then recounts her thoughts: “The world! It was what she desired with her whole heart.”\textsuperscript{36} Here, the double meaning of “world”—first, in terms of Beli’s opportunities within the Dominican sphere, which is to say, in terms of love and sexual utility, and second, to denote the world greater than the Dominican Republic which Beli yearns for—reflects perfectly the ways in which Beli is imprisoned by her circumstances. What is deemed “good” according to the narrative is beauty and sexual desirability, but Beli yearns for the opposite. Lola, too, adopts a similar attitude, and though she runs away from home in an effort to escape these circumstances, she remains inextricably tied up in them. For example, she has sex with Aldo though it “hurt[s] like hell” because her culture teaches her, much like it does for Beli, that sex is a part of her human value.\textsuperscript{37} Despite her best attempts at subverting the narrative she was born into by running away from home, Lola inexplicably enters into it once again with Aldo and remains bound to the Dominican narrative reality that her worth is contingent on her sexuality.

Such are the circumstances of misfortune that the characters in the novel, both male and female, are subject to. Men are held to a standard of violent masculinity and women are held to one of submissive sexuality. These make up the dominant narrative. What Diaz initially presents as everyday realities of Dominican life are revealed to be cultural prisons which are generated and perpetuated by their continual reiteration on the part of the people who enact and embody them. Though the narrative ideologies are maintained

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 91-93.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 79.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 113.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 64.
reinforced by the people, however, they leave these people largely unhappy. Men and women are constrained by their respective cultural ideals, which undervalue men as people inasmuch as they overvalue their masculinity and undervalue women as people inasmuch as they overvalue their sexuality. In addition to these broad, cultural realities of gender prisons, each character also has their own specialized misfortune within this framework. Oscar, for example, deals with social ostracization, Lola with being mistreated by Yunior, and Beli with breast cancer. It is a consistent theme throughout the novel that these characters in particular wish to break free from their unfortunate circumstances, though they see it as ultimately unrealistic. I propose, then, that fukú is this resignation to the belief that efforts to rescript their narratives are unrealistic. It is an acceptance that things as they are will always be as they are, and that life’s misfortune is enduring and out of one’s control.

Fukú began in the Cabral family when Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, made a snide comment about Trujillo. At this point, the Cabrals go from being the “High of the Land” to virtually nameless, and it is also at this point when the mentality of the Cabral family shifts from being one of optimism in the face of the Trujillan Dominican Republic to one of resignation and hopelessness. Abelard, prior to his downfall, is also a “lover of ideas” outside of Trujillo’s ideological dominion and tries to keep his daughters safe from Trujillo and the other men who adopt his same predatory attitude toward women. In Yunior’s words, “It was—dare we say it?—a good life.” However, after the fact, Beli is left as the last surviving Cabral and with this, the family name and the protection that comes with it is obliterated. Beli spends the first nine years of her life subject to abuse of which she never speaks, the only vestige being the burn scars on her back. La Inca takes her in and raises her as best she can, but as soon as she hits puberty, Beli rebels and begins the pattern of resignation to one’s circumstances and desire for freedom characteristic of the Cabral family.

Through this rebellion, Beli provides us with the first example of what it looks like to be resigned to the culturally prescribed

38 Ibid, 212.
39 Ibid, 214.
40 Ibid, 228, emphasis in original.
circumstances of one’s narrative prison. La Inca’s primary goal in raising Beli is to teach her that she does not have to be limited by her circumstances. She enrolls her in private school, encourages her to succeed, and tells her repeatedly, “Remember, your father was a doctor. Your mother was a nurse, a nurse.” Where La Inca would have preferred that Beli work hard in school and live a life other than that which is prescribed of her by the Dominican narrative, Beli in fact does the opposite. She spends her time not in class but chasing men, having sex with Jack Pujol in spite of it being painful because doing so is what she believes has the capacity to give her “power.” Later, with the Gangster, her hopes for “love” cloud the fact that he is married, making her, in effect, his mistress, no more than one of the many women whom he uses as a status symbol. Moreover, through all of this, Beli yearns to be “free,” but Beli’s version of “freedom” is nothing less than cultural entrapment. The first time she has sex with Jack Pujol, for example, she has “the feeling that finally she was on her way, the sense of a journey starting.” Additionally, the Gangster, to her, is an opportunity for her to have a lavish lifestyle, which she sees as freedom from La Inca. At this point in her life, she sees men as her ticket to freedom, working within her cultural prescription to achieve her goals and neglecting other means of changing her circumstances. Tellingly, when asked in a class assignment to write about where she sees herself in ten years, she writes: “I will be married to a handsome wealthy man. I will also be a doctor with my own hospital that I will name after Trujillo.” This pattern of resigning to the Dominican narrative prescribed of a person continues with Oscar.

Among Oscar Wao’s central characters, Oscar is particularly resigned to his circumstances. He recognizes his limitations with respect to Dominican maleness but finds them impossible to overcome. Yunior asks of him, “Do you ever hear yourself, Oscar?” and he sighs, “All the time.” When Yunior tries to give advice, Oscar

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41 Ibid., 82.
42 Ibid., 94.
43 Ibid., 100.
44 Ibid., 126.
46 Ibid., 207.
shrugs and says, “Nothing has any efficacy.” Oscar recognizes the nature of his narrative but buys into its stagnancy. Though, at Yunior’s prodding, he wishes to change things, he ultimately reverts back to his hopelessness and his “crazy negative talk.” He becomes increasingly attuned to the ways in which fukú acts on him, citing it as the reason for his suicide (ibid., 190). Additionally, his depressive spells (which Yunior coins “the Darkness” are characterized by the intense belief that in spite of his best efforts, his misfortune will endure and his narrative will remain firmly in place. Returning to Don Bosco to teach decades after attending as a student is particularly reflective of this narrative stagnation. Oscar tries to engage with the other outcasts to no avail and his brief romantic interest in Nataly is once again unreciprocated. It is disheartening to Oscar to find that even years later, “some things never change.” Lola also encapsulates this sentiment when describing the reasons why she did not run away after returning from Santo Domingo as a teenager: “If these years have taught me anything it’s this. You can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.” Then, as if speaking to the pervasiveness of this conviction for Dominican people, and specifically the Cabral family: “And that’s what I guess these stories are all about.” Her running away could have been a form of her taking agency and not behaving according to cultural norms, but as she understands it (and as is also a part of the dominant narrative), any attempts to rescript her narrative will inevitably pull her back in.

If fukú is a belief in the stagnancy of one’s narrative, then its counter curse, zafa, is narrative rescripting. Oscar’s personal transformation near the end of the novel is reflective of the ways in which this counter curse means becoming one’s own agent of change, and it is also his eventual embodiment of zafa that Yunior finds “wondrous” about Oscar’s life. Oscar’s transformation begins when he returns to Santo Domingo with his mother and Lola. Prior to this

47 Ibid., 174.
48 Ibid., 175.
49 Ibid., 190.
50 Ibid., 270.
51 Ibid., 264.
52 Ibid., 209.
53 Ibid.
vacation, he is entrenched in the Darkness—his own personal fukú. He is overweight and awkward and consumed by loneliness. In Santo Domingo, by contrast, he is twenty pounds lighter, smiles more in photos and even refrains from wearing his “fatguy coat,” implying that he feels less of a need to hide himself for his size.\(^5^4\) During his first trip to the Dominican Republic, Oscar spends the two weeks holed up in his room writing science fiction and fantasy. This time, however, after “refusing to succumb” to the whisper that says “You do not belong,”\(^5^5\) Oscar makes an effort to experience life in Santo Domingo. Though “he couldn’t dance, he didn’t have dress, [and] he wasn’t handsome,” all clear markers of the dominant Dominican narrative, he goes out and tries to enjoy himself in Santo Domingo anyway. His refusal to resign to his typical way of life and to rescript what has been his narrative leads him to find his own form of happiness.

Oscar’s relationship with Ybón, particularly in the ways it differs from those he had (or didn’t have) in the States, is most telling of his narrative rescripting. Tellingly, he on multiple occasions turns down his cousins’ offer to “take him to a whorehouse,”\(^5^6\) an obviously typical behavior of the Dominican male, and instead falls in love with Ybón Pimentel, who in many ways does not fit the cultural prescriptions of what it is to be an ideal Dominican woman. An “odd, odd bird”\(^5^7\) with “snarled, apocalyptic hair,”\(^5^8\) she is not “your quintessential Caribbean puta.”\(^5^9\) Additionally, Oscar interacts with her differently than he does women in the States. Rather than throw himself at her as he has done with women in the past, he reigns in his “lunatic heart,” knowing that he’ll blow it otherwise.\(^6^0\) In the States, his love is characterized by little more than superficial infatuation, but here, he gets to know her on a deeper level. For example, his mother and La Inca are incredulous at this romantic pursuit and resort to her stereotypes as a prostitute as a criticism: “Do you know that woman’s

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 275.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 277, emphasis in original.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 279.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 281.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 279.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., 285.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 283.
a PUTA? Do you know she bought that house CULEANDO?” And Oscar responds, “Do you know her aunt was a JUDGE? Do you know her father worked for the PHONE COMPANY?”61 Here, he is not so overwhelmed by infatuation that he is unable to take a deeper interest in Ybón. Additionally, he has a growing confidence. He doesn’t let up on his romantic pursuit even in the face of the capitán,62 and he returns to the Caribbean later to continue to chase her.63

Writing is also significant for Oscar’s narrative rescripting. Besides chasing Ybón, the other reason he returns to the Caribbean is to research and write about his family.64 Again, rather than hole himself up to write his own fantasy novels, he is consumed by a desire to research his family’s history and learn more about its downfall (which is to say, the inception of its fukú). The act of writing can also be understood as both a figurative and literal rescripting of one’s narrative. In one sense, writing is symbolic of Oscar’s efforts to change his life and alter how he fits into the Dominican narrative, and in another, practical sense, writing and eventual publication of such writing holds that people will read it and conceivably change their perspectives as a result, thereby also rescripting the collective narrative. Thus, in these later pages of the novel, Oscar is no longer resigned to his seemingly perpetual dork-dom but instead realizes that he can be the agent of change for himself. Change, then, occurs in one of two ways: either he changes himself to fit the dominant narrative or he changes his narrative to better fit him. Examples of the former include that he loses twenty pounds and, in part, that he has a relationship with Ybón, for the culture prescribes that romantic success with women is meaningful to what it is to be a Dominican male. More frequent, though, are his implicit efforts to change the narrative according to which he defines himself, which include his agency and his writing.

With this understanding that zafa is narrative rescripting, I also propose a related symbolism to the golden-eyed Mongoose, which appears periodically throughout the novel. Specifically, it appears any time a character is at a crossroads and symbolizes the

61 Ibid., 282.
62 Ibid., 301.
63 Ibid., 317.
64 Ibid.
opportunity to choose fukú, which is to say, resignation to the way things are, or zafa, which is the reclamation of agency. For example, when Beli loses her first son, the Mongoose appears to tell her that she “must rise” or she’ll “never have her son or daughter.” Here, it gives her a choice to either rise and continue her life armed with the optimism that she may have future children or to accept her misfortune and continue living amidst it. The Mongoose also appears to Oscar before his suicide attempt, as if to warn him that jumping from the bridge is a surrendering to his circumstances and to inform him that he has other options, that life need not always be as it is. In the days leading up to Oscar’s transformative switch from narrative resignation to narrative rescripting, the Mongoose also appears to him in his dreams, signifying Oscar’s choice between remaining in the Darkness or reclaiming his agency. Finally, it also appears to Oscar after he has been beaten nearly to death by “Messrs. Grod and Grundy,” on the part of the capitán. The mongoose asks him, “What will it be, muchacho? More or less?” and Oscar, exhausted and in pain, initially responds, “Less! Less! Less!” However, when he remembers his family and “how he used to be when he was younger and more optimistic,” he changes his mind and croaks, “More.” Here, given a final opportunity to accept the reality of his circumstances, which in this case include a near-death beating and unrequited love, Oscar chooses “more.” This is to say, he chooses the opportunity to continue to rescript, though “less,” which in this case means death, might have been easier.

This, then, is the meaning behind Oscar’s “wondrous” life: that in a world in which the norm is to resign to one’s circumstances, one can choose to be hopeful. Where one may be inclined to believe that their narrative is stagnant, they can take agency and rescript. In a world of fukú, one can choose zafa. Reading between the lines of Yunior’s narration, the ways in which Oscar serves as an example to Yunior become clear. By the end of the novel, Yunior counteracts the dominant attitude toward his neighborhood: “most of my colleagues

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65 Ibid., 149.
66 Ibid., 190.
67 Ibid., 298.
68 Ibid., 301.
think Perth Amboy is a dump, but I beg to differ.” He rescripts the narrative so that his becomes more attuned to him. He tells the reader that after Oscar’s death, he “[doesn’t] run after girls anymore,” a marked shift from his former self whose behavior was governed by the Dominican narrative. Consistent with the value of writing for Oscar in both literally and figuratively rescripting his narrative, Yunior teaches creative writing at Middlesex Community College and also writes for himself on his own. Most poignantly, Oscar appears to Yunior in his dreams, “eyes smiling,” holding up a book. “Zafa,” he says as he hands it to him, and Yunior sees that “the book’s pages are blank.” That zafa signifies a rescripting of sorts could not be made clearer. Just as Oscar has made himself the author of his life rather than succumbed to his ordinary narrative, he urges Yunior to do the same. Write your story, Oscar seems to say.

From the lens of narrative stagnation versus rescripting, it is therefore easy to appreciate this as a possible explanation for fukú’s genealogic effect. It is not as though a supernatural curse is working its way through generations, necessarily, but that the attitude in which one buys into narrative stagnation is learned from one’s parents. Just so, zafa also has a genealogic legacy. Yunior takes care to preserve the artifacts of Oscar’s life as he records them because he sees himself as a link in the genealogic chain of Oscar’s story. In part, he records Oscar’s life so that Isis, Lola’s daughter, who will conceivably encounter the same crossroads that Oscar did and who will be encompassed by the same desire to make sense of her family’s history, may learn from Oscar’s addition to the family narrative. In addition to Yunior recording Oscar’s life for the sake of genealogical preservation of zafa, the preservation also functions as his own learning opportunity. In the introduction, he characterizes the book as “a zafa of sorts … my very own counterspell.” In a subtle twist of irony, though Yunior first sought to be Oscar’s zafa in sharing with him his “playerly wisdom,” Oscar eventually became Yunior’s.

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69 Ibid., 326.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 325.
73 Ibid., 7.
74 Ibid., 173.
Thus, *Oscar Wao* is not only a preservation of Oscar’s life, but a living example of zafa to Yunior.

However, zafa is not limitless. Narrative rescripting can never be narrative erasure, and so, as Yunior notes, “some things never change.”\(^75\) For example, Yunior and Lola will never be together. Yunior dreams of telling Lola “the words that could have saved [them],” but before he can “shape the vowels,” he wakes up. “That’s how you know it’s never going to come true,” he writes, “Never, ever,”\(^76\) implying that his and Lola’s romantic impossibility is out of Yunior’s locus of influence. Additionally, Yunior’s dreams are in some cases symbolic of zafa, as is true of Oscar handing him the blank book, but occasionally also contain elements of fukú. This is true when Yunior looks up at Oscar and “he has no face,” a motif throughout the novel that presents itself in cases of extreme, uncontrollable misfortune. For example, Beli dreams of the “man with no face” when she must leave the Dominican Republic to keep from getting killed by the Gangster’s henchmen,\(^77\) and both Abelard and Oscar are encountered by a faceless man when they are taken to the canefields to be beaten nearly to death.\(^78\) Ultimately, of course, Oscar is killed as a result of his efforts to rescript his narrative, suggesting that in this final case of rescripting, he made the mistake of doing so amidst uncompromising circumstances. Perhaps fukú will always rear its ugly head and perhaps it is not wholly escapable. However, what Yunior teaches us through Oscar is that circumstance is not all that makes up one’s life. Even in cases of utter hopelessness, one can choose to change their misfortune within the parameters of their circumstance.

In sum, I interpret fukú as not so much of a supernatural curse, but rather an attitude that resigns one to their misfortune. The misfortune for characters in *Oscar Wao* can largely be traced to Trujillo, and specifically, to the ways in which his prescriptions of gender serve as prisons for Dominican people. Within this framework, each person also has their individual misfortune and individual fukú. However, Oscar eventually shifts his attitude to one

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 290.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 327.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., 161.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., 237; 299).
of agency rather than resignation, rescripting the Dominican narrative to better suit his own end, which is to say, his happiness. Though this leads to his death, Yunior sees something valuable to learn from his rescripting of not only the Dominican narrative but also the Cabral family’s attitude with respect to it, and for this reason he records Oscar’s life as an example of hopefulness amidst misfortune.
Bibliography


