Writing Sample:

Speak, Friend, and Enter: Magic and Language in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* begins with an epigraph from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* and draws to a close with a passage from Alan Moore's *Watchmen.* The novel incorporates speculative fiction texts ranging from DC Comics to the Martian novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs to the complete works of Tolkien. The allusions are so thick that, since its publication in 2007, one fan was compelled to create a website of explanatory annotations for the hundreds of often deeply obscure allusions in the novel.

The persistence of these allusions cannot be explained as merely characterizing Oscar as a nerd, since they crop up throughout the novel, nearly regardless of the narrator. Even Lola chooses a Star Trek reference to describe her prophetic feelings, saying they're like "photon torpedoes" coursing through her. So how can we account for the pervasiveness of references to speculative fiction in this work? How do these allusions function in the novel?

One potential answer comes from Albert Jordy Ra-bo-teau, who claims that the novel's fantasy allusions create a world where events are given added significance. He explains allusion in the novel as a device that transforms a potentially tragic, messy, and possibly even pedestrian story into a romantic, heroic epic. The novel uses the power of suggestion through juxtaposition—the reader is able to draw comparisons between Oscar's story and hero quest stories because the two are set alongside one another. Additionally, Raboteau makes the fascinating claim that the frequency of allusion "create[s] a penumbra of meaning, a rhetoric of

significance and of signifying." In other words, the density of the allusions, not just their speculative fiction content, prompts a reading that understands the events and characters to mean more than what they seem. Raboteau concludes that such a reading transforms Oscar from a loser who can't score into a romantic hero on an epic quest for love.

Essentially, Raboteau's argument implies that *Oscar Wao* is a self-conscious contemporary incarnation of the heroic monomyth, the structure that underpins most science fiction and fantasy works. The classic structure of the so-called "hero's journey," as outlined by Joseph Campbell, consists of a "hero" who "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder," encounters "fabulous forces," meets them with a "decisive victory," and returns home "with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (23). While variations on this formula exist, Campbell argued that the general structure can be found in nearly all myths from all cultures, hence the term "monomyth."

To some extent, however, in a time that has passed through (or is passing through still) postmodernism, the untroubled use of the "hero's journey" as an organizing principle seems nearly impossible. If Lyotard is correct in saying that postmodernism can be defined by "incredulity toward metanarratives," (xxiv) the monomyth must surely have gone the way of the narrative of emancipation (37), as it too attempts to organize events or "little narratives" into a larger grand narrative. The monomyth is nothing if not a metanarrative structure; it creates a teleological narrative designed to ascribe additional meaning to the events and characters within it—Luke's taking his uncle's landspeeder to search for Artoo becomes more than the actual events of his day—it is the start of his hero's journey, his "call to adventure."

So, while a reading of *Oscar Wao* as a contemporary incarnation of the monomyth is attractive, an unqualified investment in such a teleological narrative in a work of postmodern fiction seems problematic at best, impossible at worst. While the plot can be placed into the monomythic structure, the novel preserves the sense that this grand narrative is a construct in a way that classic hero stories, like *The Odyssey* or even *The Lord of the Rings,* do not. In *Oscar Wao,* the novel's plot is placed side-by-side with references to more traditional heroic tales, at once inviting us to read Oscar's story in terms of these other stories, while simultaneously suggesting the self-consciousness of this gesture. Diaz constantly reminds us that we, the readers, are actively constructing this quest narrative, ascribing more meaning to Oscar's adventures than is literally there.

In order to provide an alternative to Raboteau's explanation of the use of allusion in *Oscar Wao*, I will start with his central concept that Diaz's allusions function through their powers of linguistic juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic to create new, heightened meaning. But my argument departs from Raboteau's conclusion that the novel should be read as a contemporary hero's quest narrative; instead I will argue that the text is about the power of language itself, that it is a narrative about the magic of narrative.

Fukú and Zafa: Magical Language

Within Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* language plays a critical role in both the content and form of the novel. The language of the text relates to magic on numerous levels: the text often understands rhetoric to be a magical and transformative force, while its content is often explicitly concerned with magic and transformation. The book even begins with a discussion of two magical words, a curse, fukú, and its counterspell, zafa.

But what is magic, exactly? I use the term "magic" in the same fairly loose sense that scholars of language and the occult, like William Covino, author of *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, and Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe, author of *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic,* use the term. Here, magic refers to the non-logical connection between signifier and signified, or the breakdown of this division. Words or objects are magical when they cause an event or meaning but the causation does not operate according to traditional logic. Covino explains that for the occultist, "distinctions between literal and figurative identity are impossible to maintain, because everything is both actual and symbolic: a talisman or a word signifies a magic power and is that power" (43). In this type of system, then, language is particularly crucial: the utterance of a word can produce a physical change in the world; the name by which a thing is called can transform the thing; the myths from the past make the present what it is.

Kimota!: Performative Utterances

Performative utterances, words that both are and cause an event, are a potent force in *Oscar Wao*, as they are in our linguistic system. This type of language allows us to reflect on the importance of the words we use and to understand their power in our social order. Words are not just empty signifiers in a chain, they are empty signifiers that *do* things, that make events happen. This understanding of language as a performative act has received a lot of attention, especially from poststructuralists like Austin and Lyotard, and the argument hardly needs to be rehearsed here. Instead, we will look at the connection between magic and the practical change wrought through language.

To begin, O'Keefe has written that in many ways, magic is real because it does something. He claims that, "Magic is real action. Something really happens, often something

violent, usually something of consequence. People are shaken, influenced, healed, destroyed, transformed. The social situation is altered" (299). If magic can then be understood as a force that changes the social order, rhetoric can certainly be understood to perform magic. As Covino puts it, "the rhetor performs magic by effecting real action; in the event that any of us employ powerful words to change a situation, or are ourselves changed by what we read or hear, we participate in a magical transactive transformation" (22).

Several allusions in *Oscar Wao* refer to actual incantations, which serves to focus attention on the ability of language to effect real, physical change. One, "Speak, friend, and enter," is the riddle Oscar has taped to the door of his dorm room in Elvish (or Sindarin, to be precise) (172). The equivocal sentence comes from Tolkien, and the solution is embedded within the text—one must only speak the word "friend," and the doors to Moria will open. This incantation is mirrored in Oscar's death scene. The guards tell him, "Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English. Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself" (322). The effects of magical language are not necessarily tied to intention or meaning. Oscar was performing translation, dealing solely with the content of the word he uttered, but this word contains an additional dimension about which he forgets—the performative. The similarities between how the words "friend" and "fire" operate in these two examples emphasize the magical role of language. From the beginning of *Oscar Wao,* words are figured as both potentially deadly and potentially redeeming, matters of life and death. Oscar's death scene serves to reemphasize this theme.

Your Name is Beautiful: The Power of Naming

Naming takes a central role in *Oscar Wao.* After all, the title "Oscar Wao" is itself a reference to the importance of names. Oscar's identity becomes mixed up with the nickname he gets in college, a corruption of Oscar Wilde, and all the associations with masculinity, queerness, ethnicity, and, of course, writing the name and its corruption carries (181). Both within Diaz's book and in the real world, naming is arguably one of the most important actions human beings do. Despite our rational awareness of the arbitrary nature of the sign, naming still retains its power for us. Names work in the same way O'Keefe claims magic works: they become real through consensus. While arbitrary to begin with, names now have the meanings we have ascribed to them, and therefore, we can utterly alter what something signifies simply by renaming it. To ascribe a particular meaning to an object or phenomenon just by giving it a phonetic tag feels like a magical act.

The magic of naming is certainly capitalized on and explored in *Oscar Wao.* The novel begins with the introduction of a word, a curse, "fukú." We then learn that this particular curse is associated with the name of a person; "the Admiral's very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours" (1). The Admiral is, of course, Christopher Columbus, whose name has taken on the qualities of an evil spell. This spell attests to the deep connection between the thing (the person of Columbus and all that he as a historical figure entails) and its name. Diaz extends the power of Columbus' name out into the real world by never using his name—he is always referred to in the novel as "the Admiral," or, as is the case with the Chinese restaurant where Belí works, with dashes: "El Tesoro de Blank" (105).

According to *Oscar Wao*, the regime of Trujillo well understood the power of names. The narrator gives us two stories wherein the mispronunciation of a name is understood as an insult to the person the name describes. He claims that, during the reign of Trujillo, "you could get lit up for even mispronouncing the Failed Cattle Thief's name" (214), and describes the Gangster's loyalty to Trujillo as so strong that he "once slew a man at a bar simply for pronouncing El Jefe's mother's name wrong" (121). Here, the text creates a distance between the past and the present by showing the disparity between the importance of the names used to describe Trujillo regime; in the past, mispronunciation alone could carry a death sentence, whereas, in this text, "Trujillo," "El Jefe," "the Failed Cattle Thief" and even "Fuckface" are interchangeable. By renaming Trujillo, Diaz (or the narrator) exerts a control over the identity of the historical figure. If truth is all constructed through consensus, then the conception of a person becomes that person's true identity. Because certain names, like "the Failed Cattle Thief" signify, this renaming seeks to transform the conception of Trujillo, and therefore, his very identity.

As the Story Goes: Language as Narrative, Narrative as Magic

The final type of magical language explored here is the most complex of the three: narrative. Within *Oscar Wao,* the use of narrative to consciously effect change in the world is a dominant theme, and of course the novel is also a narrative intended to produce some kind of change. The narrator even tells us: "even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (7). The power of narrative has long been recognized by psychologists, who use the construction of life narratives to alter the reality of people's current mental states. That this technique is actually effective seems almost magical—how can

retelling an event change the person to whom the event happened? Richard Bandler and John Grinder explain this phenomenon in *The Structure of Magic: A Book about Language and Therapy*, by pointing out the vast disparity between the world as it is and our experience of it. They claim that all of us live with a representation of reality in our minds, and this picture guides all our choices and feelings (7). Since these representations are necessarily mostly linguistic and narrative, the way we tell stories about the world to ourselves makes a real difference in how we perceive that world.

The story of Belí's childhood illustrates this use of narrative well. La Inca, a fairy-godmother-slash-Bene-Gesserit-witch figure in the novel, uses the transformative power of narrative to create the reality she wants for Belí: "Instead of talking about the Burning, or Outer Azua, La Inca talked to Belí about her lost, forgotten past, about her father, the famous doctor, about her mother, the beautiful nurse" (260). The girl's actual reality and the events that really happened to her are the Burning and Outer Azua, but La Inca creates a new reality for her through a new narrative. This narrative is told as the *real* story of Belí; that it did not happen to her is irrelevant because this narrative reveals her *real* identity. Diaz, writing that Belí was "like a character in one of Oscar's fantasy books," (253) conjures up stories of poor peasant girls who discover that they are really princesses, reminding us that the *real* is a narrative construction. Whether or not we actually slept in a cindery fireplace, the reality of our past could be the missed royal feasts and the empty, waiting satin gowns, depending on the narratives we tell ourselves.

End of Story: Troubling Conclusions

In *Oscar Wao,* Diaz pairs realistic fiction with speculative fiction, suggesting that the power of language is more than it seems. But this understanding of language as a potent,

magical force finally brings us back to where we began: the grand narrative. The novel supports the idea that events can be organized into larger narratives that imbue the smaller components with meaning, which could support a reading of *Oscar Wao* as an incarnation of the monomyth, as a contemporary novel that somehow dusts off the concept of an ordered, sympathetic universe, and makes destiny work for a postmodern audience. But here, I have argued for the magic of language in *Oscar Wao* not in terms of destiny and order, but in terms of human action. In other words, consciously or unconsciously, we make things happen in the world through naming and other utterances, and these events lead up to and comprise the narratives that we create for ourselves. Therefore, *Oscar Wao* allows us to see how, even in a world devoid of metanarratives, we can use narrative to shape our lives.

The complex implications of this conclusion can best be illustrated by an example from the text. When Oscar is taken to the cane fields by the Captain's flunkies, he attempts to work word magic on them through narrative. He tells them the story of his love for Ybon and figures himself as a hero. He places them all in a larger context by talking about future generations and the afterlife. We know his rhetoric is good because we are told, "They looked at Oscar and he looked at them and then he started to speak. The words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once" (321). And yet, the men kill him anyway, his last utterance a foolish order for his own death. The magical narrative he spins fails to affect the soldiers and fails to transform reality. The magic fails precisely because of the problematic nature of grand narratives—they only work one at a time. Reality is a world composed of billions of subjectivities, rendering impossible any narrative that claims that the universe is operating sympathetically to one protagonist at a time. The soldiers have their own sense of the narratives they are playing out, and these narratives don't fit with Oscar's.

That is not to say that a reading of Oscar as heroic is entirely unfounded. What the text ultimately allows through its myriad allusions and perspectives is a reading based on tension. Through the power of language, we can reconstruct the events of the novel in a variety of ways: Oscar is both hero and loser—a dorky, suicidal kid who dies senselessly for sleeping with the wrong middle-aged whore and a sensitive visionary who makes the ultimate sacrifice for love. Ultimately, it's all about the words we use, the names we give to the events. As Oscar says, "Ybon was the one who suggested calling the wait something else. Yeah, like what? Maybe, she said, you could call it life" (335). Diaz's novel does allow us to re-imagine the world as a place pregnant with significance and magic, but with the caveat that they are our own significance and magic and not part of some larger meaning outside of ourselves.