

14. "Chiste Apocalyptus"

Prospero in the Caribbean and the Art of Power

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In part II, chapter 5, "Poor Abelard 1944-46," we hear three jokes that go a long way toward explaining why so much of the middle portions of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is taken up with the sad history of the Dominican Republic. From the perspective of narrative form, it is not surprising that by this point in the narrative Díaz should continue to compound the numerous narrative shifts that the reader has already experienced by turning to a comedic mode that the narrator, Yunior, calls "Chiste Apocalyptus."¹ Still, of all possible narrative forms appropriate for the telling of the history of injustice, torture, and death that characterizes Dominican history generally and the history of Abelard Cabral's family particularly, why jokes and comedy? What do jokes and comedy have to do with history?² Shortly after the fateful party at which Abelard fails to produce his wife and daughter for Trujillo's certain abuse, Abelard is "buttonholed by some 'buddies' on the street and invited for a few drinks at Club Santiago."³ Trying "to shake off his sense of imminent doom by talking vigorously about history, medicine, Aristophanes, by getting very very drunk," Abelard asks the "boys" for help in relocating a bureau he had bought for his wife that afternoon (a pretense to seeing his mistress, really). Fumbling for the keys

to open the trunk of his car, Abelard may or may not have uttered the following words of the first joke: "I hope there aren't any bodies in here."⁴ Innocent enough, really, even if the car of our concern was a Packard, the very kind of car that cast a shadow on Dominican history, by being the kind of car "in which Trujillo had, in his early years, terrorized his first two elections away from the pueblo."⁵

This mild first "trunk joke" leads to a second one: "During the Hurricane of 1931 the Jefe's henchmen often drove their Packards to the bonfires where the volunteers were burning the dead, and out of their trunks they would pull out 'victims of the hurricane.' All of whom looked strangely dry and were often clutching opposition party materials." The punch line to joke number two: "The wind, the henchmen would joke, drove a bullet straight through the head of this one. Har-har."⁶ With joke number two, the narrative is clearly edging toward more dangerous ground than the first joke.

Whether the third joke was actually uttered is even much less certain than the possibilities of Abelard's having told joke number one or that Trujillo's henchmen really uttered joke number two. In fact, part of the horror of the subsequent torture, humiliation, and final destruction of Abelard at the hands of the secret police is that it is not at all certain, in fact is highly unlikely, that Abelard actually spoke joke number three. The occasion of joke number three claims that "when Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral opened the trunk of the Packard, he [is purported to have said], 'Nope, no bodies here, Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me.'"⁷ In this narrative sequence, a joke uttered or not determines the course of one man's, one family's doom.

Two weeks after the events in question, "two atomic eyes opened over civilian centers in Japan and, even though no one knew it yet, the world was remade. Not two days after the atomic bombs scarred Japan forever . . . three Secret Police officers in their shiny Chevrolet" wind up the road to Abelard's house and "Already it's the Fall."⁸ Apocalypse and the Fall, simultaneously, on a personal level as well as on the level of world history. In the history of the Abelard family, for the next nine years one apocalyptic shock follows upon another, leaving Abelard, at the end, a mindless remnant of the elegant human specimen he had once been. "Poor Abelard," indeed.

In order to round out the reader's justified sense of rational explanation, Yuniór poses the question that instrumental understandings of the course of history require: Did Abelard say the jokes or not? "Did he have a hand in his own destruction?"⁹ Was his tragic demise "an accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú?"¹⁰ In response, Yuniór claims, "The only answer I can give you is the

least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself."¹¹ The fukú does not leave memoirs; the Trujillato "didn't share their German contemporaries' lust for documentation," so no documentary evidence will surface to endorse an answer.¹² And yet, and here is perhaps the best part of these miserable jokes, Yuniór surmises: perhaps Abelard "didn't get in trouble because of his daughter's culo or because of an imprudent joke."¹³

An alternate explanation "contends that he got in trouble because of a book."¹⁴ In this alternate version,

Sometime in 1944 . . . while Abelard was still worried about whether he was in trouble with Trujillo, he started writing a book about—what else—Trujillo . . . an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime! A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world! . . . Alas, the grimoire in question (so the story goes) was conveniently destroyed after Abelard was arrested.¹⁵

The grimoire in question is Abelard's lost book on Trujillo, "conveniently destroyed." Let us dwell on the word *grimoire*. The word *grimoire* is commonly held to be derived from the Old French word *grammaire*, which had initially been used to refer to books written in Latin (that is, for all practical purposes during the early modern period, all books).¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the term had gained its now more common usage and had begun to be used to refer purely to books of magic. However, the term *grimoire* also developed into a figure of speech used to indicate something that was difficult or even impossible to understand.¹⁷ It was only in the nineteenth century, with the increasing interest in occultism in England following the publication of Frances Barrett's *The Magus* (1801) that the term entered the English language in reference to the specific mystery occasioned by books of magic.¹⁸

From ancient Mesopotamia in cuneiform tablets, through the early modern period in Jewish and Islamic texts, and then into the Caribbean in the fifteenth century and early sixteenth, grimoires inscribing magical incantations and spells, divinatory texts, and mystical philosophy left Europe and were imported to those parts of the Americas controlled by the Spanish, Portuguese, British, and French empires. In the Americas, grimoires came into contact with the natural philosophies and mystical beliefs of countless

indigenous peoples and thus intersected with structures of knowledge of other new populations brought to America from Africa. From descriptions of a set of symbols and how to combine them to create well-formed sentences in Latin, and then, by extension and metonymy, to books of magic, a grimoire thus becomes the grammar of magic, the rhetoric of magic spells, the syntax of charms and divinations, as well as the form of books on how to summon or invoke supernatural entities such as angels, spirits, or demons, conveying the protocols of belief systems outside the pale of accepted patterns of belief. In time, the very books themselves, as mystical book objects, come to be imbued with magical powers.

Into this history of the grimoire enters the history of Abelard. As José David Saldivar has pointed out, Abelard was nothing if not a bookish bookman.¹⁹ In the novel, Yunió describes him as “widely read in Spanish, English, French, Latin and Greek; a collector of rare books, an advocate of outlandish abstractions, a contributor to the *Journal of Tropical Medicine*, and an amateur ethnographer in the Fernando Ortiz mode” and, moreover, as “the author of four books.”²⁰ None of these books, neither the “Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral”—the grimoire naming Trujillo as “a supernatural, or perhaps alien, dictator who had installed himself on the First Island of the New World”—nor the “hundreds he owned,” survived his fall and destruction at the hands of the torturous police.²¹ “All of them lost or destroyed,” “confiscated and reportedly burned,” including “every paper he had in his house,” and leaving “not one single example of his handwriting.”²² An eerie replay of Caliban’s advice to “destroy Prospero’s books.”

In *The Tempest*, Caliban is represented as a less than human monster. Yet, Prospero has given him the tools to understand the fact that he has been made less than human:

You taught me language, and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse you. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!²³

Too dim-witted to organize his own rebellion, Caliban finds wandering the island the greedy, drunken, shipwrecked sailor Stephano and urges him on as an ally against Prospero. And sensing that Prospero’s power comes from the force of his language, his words, and most importantly, his books, Caliban understands that to take Prospero’s power he needs “first to possess his books.”²⁴

Precisely because of moments such as this in the play, it is not surprising to find that Caliban has been the focus of some of the best critical discussions of *The Tempest* by postcolonial scholars. A notable case is an essay entitled “Caliban” by the Cuban critic and theoretician Roberto Fernández Retamar.²⁵ Retamar sees the plight of Shakespeare’s half-man, half-monster as an allegory for the status of the inhabitants of the colonized world: Prospero invaded our lands, killed our ancestors, enslaved us, and taught us his language to make himself understood. He has possessed us with his books. “What is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?” asks Retamar.²⁶

There are many links, then, between Shakespeare’s monster Caliban and Abelard’s story in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: ideas concerning human monsters, education, language, political power, and the magical agency of books. Of these various possibilities of similarity of purpose between *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Tempest*, perhaps the most important one concerns the relationship between political power and aesthetics, especially the aesthetic form of knowledge in books. The examples I have given from *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Tempest* demonstrate that politics is itself an aesthetic practice. It is a human endeavor that is rooted in individuals’ desire to impose their imprint upon particular situations and things. This is as true of progressive democracies as it is of right-wing, neoliberal dictatorships. In order to shape their world, individuals must use means to represent ideas, sometimes misrepresent motives, carefully imitate past deeds and actors, and mobilize people through the rhetorical manipulation of emotional reactions. All this for the grand aim of giving lasting form to a particular state, political struggle, or to shape the course of a movement.

On Monsters and Postcolonial Subjects

As odd a connection as it might seem, Junot Díaz’s take on *The Tempest* is not unlike Kingsley Amis’s. In *The New Maps of Hell* (1960), Amis had noted of *The Tempest*: “Even if one resists the temptation to designate Caliban as an early mutant—‘a freckled whelp,’ you remember, ‘not gifted with a human shape,’ but human in most other ways . . . Prospero’s attitude . . . and indeed his entire role as an adept, seems to some degree experimental as well as simply thaumaturgical.”²⁷ Whether magician or adept, Prospero in his

relation to Caliban reinforces the connection between science and magic, human and monster, that vectors the force of power and knowledge in a colonial context.²⁸ Certainly in Junot Díaz's most recent fiction, particularly in the short story "Monstro," this connection is at the core of the critique of racism and colonialism.²⁹ What distinguishes Díaz's monsters from Caliban is that they narrate their own history, unhinged from the framework of Prospero's design and the romantic account of the victory of culture over monstrosity.

In the past, some theorists, philosophers, and social critics have recognized aesthetic aspects to politics. Yet the rubric in which they have worked has always been that of ethically based thinking about politics. Certainly, there is an important link between ethics and politics, but this link is neither necessary nor sufficient to understand political life.³⁰ What *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* continuously shows is that there is a wide chasm between ethics and politics. As a result, political theory guided by impulses of right, justice, or rectitude—all laudably desired ends of political action—often turns out to fall short of what occurs in the lived experience of any particular set of individuals. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* asks us to do something incredibly different than to bet on a functional relationship between ethics and politics. It asks whether we can think of examples of how other forms of political theory might be useful to comprehending actual experience.

In particular, can we think of how aesthetic theory might be a useful tool for comprehending actual experience in a realistic manner? The notion of imagination, especially as codified in Prospero's books—the master's tools, emblems and avatars of power—is the nexus between aesthetic theory and political theory. That political theory and aesthetics share the key concept of the imagination must force us to think whether the connection is merely contingent, semantic, or holds a deeper meaning. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it turns out that when we press the question of the role of the imagination in both political and aesthetic terms we see that the imagination is fundamental to the way that we experience political belonging in a nation-state of any kind.

The experiences Yunior narrates are not weird or fantastic, exotic or based in a third world divided exotically from the metropolitan United States, Macondo unrelated to McOndo, as it were. In the world of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the simultaneity of modernization and dependency, indeed, the interdependence between the modern, postmodern,

and never modern has become the new norm, even the paradigm of the new norm in the Americas. The great achievement of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, then, is Díaz's ability to balance a coming-of-age story and a meditation on the history of horrors in the Americas since the first days of discovery with the sci-fi, role playing, comic book fantasy-life in the imaginary of one of the least heroic of disappearing fantasy heroes one could imagine through the power of art and the book as grimoire. This is a case where the Bildungsroman leads us inexorably to the realm of the transnational imaginary.

If we conceive of the syntax of codes, images, and icons, as well as the tacit assumptions, convictions, and beliefs that seek to bind together the varieties of national discourses as forming a social, imaginary structure, then a transnational imaginary is the attempt to describe imaginary structures emerging from the social, cultural, and political intersections of multinational populations and polycultural meanings across nation states. While I am in accord with views emphasizing the persistence of national power, I maintain that the transnational spaces we see developing around the globe today also emphasize the limits of national power. They do so by exceeding the bounds of nationally prescribed versions of culture, economics, and politics. Current debates on the meaning of citizenship as a right of national politics have often ignored the ways processes of decolonization and migration, as well as social identities based on ethnicity, race, and gender, point to the existence of identities other than national identities as the basis for defining citizenship.

In understanding the power of the visualization of a transnational world beyond restrictive nationalisms, literary works exploring the nature of the transnational experience and the art of power are laying the groundwork for an understanding of a contemporary staging of new versions of the self, activating the new forms of identity, and imagining the new cultural and political worlds that we see today emerging at the intersections of the Global South and North.³¹

At the very least, this representation of a transnational reality that does not yet exist in fully realized form serves to enable the postethnic and post-race visions emerging since the turn of the millennium, and especially since 9/11, from a whole new generation of writers, born for the most part in the post-civil rights era. The works of these writers represent the post-magical realism, post-postmodern, postborderlands and neofantasy transnational turn in what one could call the search for a new racial imaginary in the

contemporary era of American literature. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* requires us to consider the nature of the formation of nation and community, the ethos of justice, and the crossing of symbolic borders and inhabiting the transnational imaginary, but all in the mode of multicultural fantasy and romance.

In my own work of the past few years, I use a particular battery of terms to get at some of these issues having to do with the intersections, overlaps, and contact points between the Global North and South: chief among them being the idea of alternative modernities to describe the knowledge that exists in the borders between Global North and South.³² The writings of intellectuals from this domain of overlap draw their power from subjection and, in turn, help to give form to the condition. This is what I term vernacular poetics—an imagination of borderland experience in which exclusion from the domain of rationality and history rules. If, as Winfried Fluck has argued, “Fictional texts represent made-up worlds, even when they claim to be ‘realistic,’” then how is it possible for fiction and its “made-up worlds” to reveal something meaningful about history?³³ In his discussion of Wolfgang Iser’s reception aesthetics, Fluck uses the term *negative aesthetics* to refer to one way fantasy and the imaginary intersect with history. Negative aesthetics refers to the potential of literature to “expose the limitations and unacknowledged deficiencies of accepted systems of thought.”³⁴

In the case of contemporary ethnic fiction, negative aesthetics allows us to conceive how fantasy functions in relation to history to create an imaginary vision that goes beyond the formulations of realism, modernism, magical realism, and postmodern metafiction to articulate precisely what is absent in realism, magical realism, and metafiction. Formally, the role of the imaginary is thus crucial to the functioning of contemporary ethnic fiction, for in allowing the experience of something not literally represented, it compels readers to “provide links” across the “blanks” created by the intentional “suspension of relations” between meaningful segments of the text.³⁵ But beyond literary modernism’s defamiliarizing function of compelling “the reader to become active in making sense of what often appears incomplete or incomprehensible,” the literary works I refer to here as examples of a search for a new racial imaginary do something more in linking fantasy, history, and the imaginary.³⁶

If it is justice we seek in love, in life, and in the world, then justice, poetic or otherwise, is precisely what we do not get at the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Murdered cruelly, mercilessly, Oscar is not redeemed by

romance; the history of the Dominican Republic, forged in both imported and home-grown tyranny, is not atoned by utopian desire.³⁷ And if we think we might be able to bracket the tyranny by seeing it as a product of distant Third World perversities, it turns out that Ybón’s jealous boyfriend has full “First World” credentials, as an “American citizen,” “naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York.”³⁸ Given the magnitude of the crimes assembled in the chronicle of Oscar’s family’s story, itself a synecdoche of trans-American hemispheric history, none of the novel’s three endings can even hope to account for, let alone blunt, the apocalyptic, world destroying evil “that not even postmodernism can explain away.”

While romanticism gives us fantasy coalescing with reality, and literary modernism gives us the defamiliarization of reality, and postmodernism gives us the ludic play of metafiction, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gives us something else, namely, the mimetic representation of fantasy. Not fantasy, as such, but its imitation, at double and sometimes triple remove. Why? And where does the mimesis of fantasy, the staging of fantasy, rather than the representation of fantasy itself, leave us within the realms of the imaginary? Without the ending of a comic book, sci-fi, or fantasy, *Oscar Wao* requires us to read the story of the history of conquest, colonization, diaspora, and social injustice in the Americas by forging links between the fantasy of the imaginary and the real of history.

This connection between fantasy and history, bewildering in the continual oscillation of the narrative’s multiple referentiality to both the real and the imaginary, cannot be formulated by the text but forms the unwritten base that conditions and transcends the literal meanings of both history and fantasy, in the process creating something new, something we might call imaginary history or historical fantasy. It is the aesthetic equivalent of what I have identified as the rhetorical function of parabasis and irony in other related contexts of contemporary American ethnic fiction. It is a way of describing the “something more” that the literary works I refer to as posttrace fictions do in linking fantasy, history, and the imaginary—the imaginary history—in order to remain true to ethnic literature’s utopian allegiance to social justice.³⁹

In the end, true to the forms of fantasy that the narrative uses to tell his story, Oscar remains invisible, absent, and pieced together only tenuously from fragments and absences, all in the mode of fantasy, science fiction, gothic, and horror—that is to say, in the form of all the “genres” in the service of history gone awry.⁴⁰ As a sexual being manqué, racialized, classed,

and colonized by the long historical legacies of coloniality and modernity, at the novel's end Oscar does not so much disappear as he continues to perform his disappearance as a subject of history from the story of his own emergence. In contrast to the fantasy of heroic individual sexual desire, figured by Yuniór's compulsive and destructive hypermasculine sexuality, a sexuality for which Oscar always longs and by which he is finally destroyed, Oscar's historical fantasy leads elsewhere. It binds him more closely to Beli, Lola, Ybón, Abelard, and all of the women and men caught in the total terror of real dictatorial regimes such as the historical Trujillato, even if narrated in the form of "the more speculative genres," as Oscar describes them. The terror created by really bad men masks "The beauty!" which is but another name for life.⁴¹

How could one possibly conceive of a narrativity to still this chaos? How create romance from consciousness colonized by self-hate and self-doubt? What kind of beauty could we even imagine to counter the horror before and after the beauty? And to what end? What would a literature of political and racial romance, sensation, fantasy, gothic, marvels, and absolute otherness appropriate to transport us to the margins of the Imaginary and the Real that earlier forms of U.S. ethnic literature have not? What would its referential world look like?

It is the nature of romantic literature to pose these kinds of questions. But when fantasy and metafiction come into contact with history and the racialized imagination, vernacular cultures, and the stories of figures from the American Global South, they become something else again. And now we are back to the role of history. Being a Latino/a writer in the United States, appropriating history and the concerns of the distinctively modern experience of the borderlands with the Global South does not require orthodox narrative structures and realist codes of representation. Sharing the goal of most ethnic writers to imagine a state of achieved social justice, Díaz certainly employs all of the classical forms and themes available to ethnic writers to make his point. Díaz draws from the traditions of vernacular narrative, popular culture, and the literary avant-garde, however, not simply to reiterate them, but precisely to show the constant and complete rupture between the redemptive course of American history and its origins in conquest.⁴²

Going beyond the defamiliarizing strategies of avant-garde literature, works like Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* attempt to articulate an imaginary fantasy to the second and third degrees that might, paradoxically,

serve as the real basis for understanding our bewilderingly complex postcontemporary history. Far from mere parody or a sign of the exhaustion of the avant-garde, Díaz's use of the comedic "Chiste Apocalyptus," the joke at the end of the world, is a formal attempt to counter the reduction of the reality of horror under the sheer weight of the commonplace. That is why, with the cruel murder of our hero, Díaz returns us pitilessly, as does Oscar at the moment of his brutal beating, "back to the Real," with a capital R.⁴³ He compels us to see that in the age of free markets and globalization the world has diminished and constricted so that we "Americans" now share with others around the globe a synthetic fantasy culture of television shows, animated films, space operas, graphic novels, and digital media, a synchrony of intersecting fantasies worthy of being considered "magical." The reality of this new world is not gratuitous, or virtual; but in its longing for a new world yet to be it might well be postmagical, and postracial. It takes us into the heart of Prospero's power, and the functioning of the art of power.

Notes

1. Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), 233.
2. This essay is an elaboration of a reading of Junot Díaz I first offered in "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism and Postrace Aesthetics in American Fiction," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 574–99.
3. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 233.
4. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 234.
5. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 234.
6. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 234.
7. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 235.
8. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 237.
9. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 243.
10. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 243.
11. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 243.
12. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 243.
13. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 245.
14. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 245.
15. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 245.
16. Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–2.
17. Davies, *Grimoires*, 1.
18. Davies, *Grimoires*, 135–36.

19. José David Saldívar, "Conjectures on 'Americanness' and Junot Díaz's 'Fukú Americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," *Global South* 5, no. 1 (spring 2011): 120–36.
20. Saldívar, "Conjectures," 213.
21. Saldívar, "Conjectures," 246.
22. Saldívar, "Conjectures," 246.
23. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act 1, scene 2.
24. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act 3, scene 2.
25. Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
26. Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, 24.
27. Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 30.
28. See Michele Braun, "Science Fiction as Experimental Ground for Issues of the Postcolonial Novel," in Masood A. Raja, Jason W. Ellis, and Swaralipi Nandi, *The Post-national Fantasy: Essays on Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitics and Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 17–29.
29. Junot Díaz, "Monstro," *The New Yorker*, June 4, 2012, 106.
30. See Diego A. von Vacano, *The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 1–8, for an excellent discussion of the relationship among art, power, and knowledge.
31. See Brook Thomas, "The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology, or, What's Literature Have to Do with It?" *American Literary History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 622–31. Thomas's discussion of Iser's "reception aesthetics" and Fluck's notion of "the cultural imaginary" are immensely useful articulations of the functioning of literary texts to compel readers to imagine not an "existing reality" but to "realize something that does not yet exist" (625).
32. See especially "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism and Postrace Aesthetics in American Fiction," 574–99.
33. Winfried Fluck, "The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte," *European Journal of English Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 255. See also Winfried Fluck, "The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory," *New Literary History* 31, no. 1 (2000): 175–210. Here, concerning Iser's notion of "negativity," as "an unlimited negating potential" in a text, Fluck argues that as an integral and foundational quality of a text, negativity "dislocates all norms, meanings, and forms of organization, not just those we would like to negate. This continuous invalidation is . . . the precondition for activating literature's special potential," allowing it to serve as a permanent and ongoing "negation of the negation" (186).
34. Fluck, "The Role of the Reader," 256.
35. Fluck, "The Role of the Reader," 258. Fluck puts it this way: "Every text consists of segments that are determinate, and of blanks between them that are indeterminate. In order to establish consistency between these segments, the reader has to become active in providing links for that which is missing. A blank is thus not a mere gap, or

an ideologically instructive omission. It is an intentional, often carefully crafted, suspension of relations in order to make us provide links for what is disconnected. The difference is significant: A mere gap allows readers to indulge in their own projections, a blank compels them to set up relations between their own imaginary constructs and the text" (258).

36. Fluck, "The Role of the Reader," 256.
37. On the relationship between "justice" and "literature," see Winfried Fluck, "Fiction and Justice," *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2003): 19–42. See also Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). The relationship between justice and aesthetics is the core of my argument in "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism and Postrace Aesthetics in American Fiction," 574–99.
38. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 295.
39. On the representation of social justice, see Fluck, "Fiction and Justice," 20–21.
40. See Caroline Roberts, "Bostonist Interview: Junot Díaz, Author," *Bostonist*, September 10, 2007, accessed April 22, 2015, http://bostonist.com/2007/09/10/bostonist_inter_1.php.
41. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 335.
42. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 222.
43. Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 298.