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“The proper path of Dominican male-itude”: Gendered Violence, Accountability, and Male Perspective in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Sofia Lavidalie

The immigrant narrative in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* happens largely within the metafiction of the novel, with self-proclaimed player Yunior omnisciently narrating the stories of Oscar and his family. As Oscar finds himself living out the same tragedies that his mother, Beli, once lived through (a result of *fukú*, the narrative will remind you), we see the contrast in how Yunior narrates two similar but different gendered narratives. In framing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* through a masculinist lens, the story ends up awarding empathy to male trauma and female trauma unevenly.

The backstory of Beli, who was raised and socialized in a heavily patriarchal society, is told entirely by Yunior. This signifies Beli's lack of agency as a woman. Even as an adult, years removed from her hometown in Santo Domingo, the effects of the gendered violence she once suffered reverberated through her life. This materializes in two ways: her obsession with her appearance and her relationship with her daughter, Lola. Lola, on the other hand, narrates her own story entirely by herself. She openly acknowledges the workings of male violence in her life, and she rebels against it. Unlike her mother, she has agency. The narration signifies this through the fact that Yunior's omniscience does not extend to her.

Because of this, Lola's narrative contrasts heavily with Beli's. While Lola makes no excuses for those who hurt her, Beli's narrative is told somewhat through a context of blame. It focuses extensively on Beli's adolescent body, with Yunior even pausing the narrative to address it directly, saying, “Even your humble Watcher, reviewing her old pictures, is struck by what a fucking babe she was.” As she is shamed for being the neighborhood “tetúa,” she is also shamed, in a sense, by the narrator (Díaz 92). There are several instances of what could be categorized as male abuse towards Beli and other adolescent girls that are disregarded as such. In the case of Beli, the story is framed in such a way that you are led to believe she deserves such abuse. One instance sees a middle-aged dentist slip a note to the newly developed Beli, saying, “I want to see you,” in spite of Beli being a young teenager. Yunior goes to extensive lengths to justify this, dwelling on the dentist's, “fat wife who ordered a cake from La Inca almost every month, either for one of her seven children or her first-some cousins (but most likely for her and her alone)” (Díaz 93). The implication is that the state of women's bodies entitles men to certain actions against them. Because the dentist's wife is fat, she deserves to be cheated on. Because Beli has large breasts, she deserves to be sexually harassed. Yunior treats Beli with a level of undeserved accountability for her interactions with gendered violence. He applies a sense of agency to her story that she does not really have—she is a child; her interactions with male violence are not her own fault—and in doing so, removes any agency she *actually* has from the equation.

The narrative does the opposite with Oscar's story. While Beli is held accountable when she should not be, Oscar is not held accountable for things he is in direct control of. Even as Yunior the character continuously implores Oscar to improve himself, Yunior the narrator

continuously sympathizes with him and ignores his acts of violence towards women. Though he acknowledges the circumstances leading to Oscar's unsuccessful interactions with women—his weight, his nerdiness, his refusal to be social—he still talks about Oscar as if he is being denied something he deserves. When Oscar befriends a local girl, Ana, Yuniór dwells on Oscar's presence in the “bane of nerdboys everywhere,” the, “Let's-Be-Friends Vortex,” commonly referred to as the friend zone (Díaz 41). “Poor Oscar,” Yuniór says, as if Oscar has been somehow slighted. He seems to believe that Oscar, in spite of all his shortcomings, is owed more romantic success than he has achieved, and his failing to do so is not his own failing, but a failing of luck, a failing on the part of the universe. When Oscar has his first taste of success with women, Yuniór does not account it to his weight loss or his decision to “rein in his lunatic heart” (Díaz 283). Yuniór believes, “Ybón...was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude” (Díaz 283). Ybón is not explored as a character with her own psyche and needs, but as a device put forth by the universe to subvert Oscar's failings.

Yuniór's narration, despite acknowledging the workings of gendered violence in the characters' lives, also ignores the fact that Oscar is a perpetrator of male violence and sexism. This reoccurs throughout the book in his threatening violence towards the boyfriends of his love interests, his violent fantasies about the women he lusts after, and his disregard for Ybón's safety when pursuing her. The first instance of this occurs early in the book, when Oscar feels unearned resentment towards his sister's attractive friends for not reciprocating his interest in them. He fantasizes about one girl, Maritza, being interested in him, and having the opportunity to brush her off as an “ignorant bitch” (Díaz 27). These fantasies continue into his relationship with Ana, although they grow more violent, as he fantasizes about, “let[ting] Ana find [her boyfriend] hanging from a light fixture in his apartment, his tongue a swollen purple bladder in his mouth” (Díaz 43). Later, he even acts on these urges, stealing a gun from his uncle and standing outside of Ana's boyfriend's home with the intention of killing him. Again, in college, when he is interested in another girl, Jenni, his unreciprocated feelings lead him to violence. He walks in on her having sex with another man and, in a fit of rage, calls her a “whore” and “attacked her walls, tearing down her posters and throwing her books everywhere” (Díaz 187). Though he is punished for his actions, the narrative does little to condemn him, as in all his cases of violence. Consistently, Yuniór places Oscar in contrast to the abusive, violent boyfriends of the girls he pines after, but Oscar is not really all that different from them. The only difference is the lack of agency the narrative supposes for Oscar: it is not his fault that he is violent; he is only reacting to the unfairness of the universe in not giving him the sexual and romantic success he is owed. He cannot be held accountable for his actions. This is the masculinist perspective.

Though Oscar and Beli's narratives parallel each other, Oscar's narrative pivots from hers at the most important moment, and this is what leads to his death. After Beli's first beating, when somebody that she loves is put into harm's way (her unborn child), she relents. La Inca asks, “Would you like me to call your Gangster?” (Díaz 154). Beli says no. After the death of her child, Beli turns away from her love, immigrates to New York, and survives. Similarly, when Ybón kisses Oscar, and her boyfriend beats him up, Oscar is given a chance to go back to America. Somebody that he loves is put into harm's way, too, with Ybón's boyfriend, “put[ting] his .44 Magnum in her vagina and ask[ing] her who she really loved” (Díaz 304). Still, Oscar continues pursuing her. Even when she begs him not to, even when she tells him that her

boyfriend will kill both of them for his actions, Oscar stalks her and puts her directly in danger of being killed by her boyfriend.

Oscar's shortcomings are consistently excused as being a result of fukú. This narrative device provides a way of viewing the parallels between himself and his mother in a way that absolves Oscar of any responsibility. Because of fukú, Oscar is supposedly predetermined to repeat his mother's tragic narrative. His mother's narrative, however, hinges largely on the gendered violence she experiences as a woman. As a male, Oscar cannot organically follow this same pathway, so in a sense, he creates fukú for himself. While Beli's misfortune comes to her naturally, beyond her control, Oscar's comes mostly because of things he *can* control but chooses not to. For instance, both of their narratives depend largely on their body issues. While Beli has no choice in the sudden growth of her breasts, Oscar has a choice in his weight and simply decides to follow the path of romantic misfortune. In the end, his compulsive need to feed into his family's curse surpasses his mother's tragic narrative as he eventually causes his own death.

The three central characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* all grapple with gendered violence, but the specific experience of female trauma exists outside the bounds of Yunió's understanding. It exists outside of his language. When he does approach it, his fundamental misunderstanding of the experience leads him to place undeserved accountability on women regarding their own trauma. This also leads him to mishandle the women in Oscar's narrative and, by extension, fail to acknowledge the true nature of fukú in Oscar's life as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Works Cited

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, 2007.