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**Junot Diaz' novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:
McOndo for sure, but magical realism nonetheless – with a new twist¹**

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Among the several studies² devoted to Diaz's first novel, the notions of “magical realism” and “McOndoism” have already been thematized in Monica Hanna's substantial article, “Reassembling the Fragments: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*”³. This reading will lead to an inflection of some of her conclusions. For while I agree that in this book Diaz does in some ways engage in an attempt “to write a new history of the Dominican Republic” and “to document resistance”, I do not think that it is his use of magical realism that presents “an amplification of Dominican and United States historical reality” (516).

Other literary genres and narrative modes are played with here, in a work that, from a formal and esthetic point of view, may be seen as a somewhat clumsy fictional construction, one likely to make more experienced novelists frown. And yet, in spite of some manifest – intentional or not – flaws in the wavering narrator's position, Junot Diaz's first novel was showered with prizes and became a bestseller. I hope to show that what Diaz managed to do, is to twist a variety of fiction yarns in a diegetic world that pertains both to magical realism and McOndoism by: 1) choosing Oscar Wao, a totally unlikely yet winning character, as a quixotic hero; 2) creating a new mix between mostly the family saga and the thriller as literary genres go ; and 3) adopting a new, extremely irreverent, often annoying, and yet appealing, tone of narrative voice that reminds us of the cheekiness of a Holden Caulfield.

Compared to the latter's universe in *Catcher in the Rye*, Diaz has us take a tremendous cultural leap from the affluent white New York of the 1950s to the Latino backyards of turn of the 21st-century New Jersey and their ties to the Dominican Republic – Diaz's own native country. To carry on the comparison with *Catcher in the Rye*, what is depicted in Diaz's thriller could be entitled “Killers in the Cane”, if we wanted to play a variation on the nightmarish associations that J.D. Salinger chose to allude to in the title of his bestselling novel.

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1 This paper was read on 28 March 2014 in a panel entitled “Race and Identities across the Transatlantic and Caribbean Worlds” at the 74th Annual Convention of the College Language Association (CLA) “Pathways and Porticos : The Caribbean and the South as Catalysts in Languages and Literatures” hosted by Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, March 26-29, 2014.

2 See under References.

3 *Callaloo* 33.2, 2010, p.498-520. It is actually through Hanna's publication that I first heard of Junot Diaz as a rising star among American writers, so my debt to her is a large one.

What claims to magical realism does *The Life of Oscar Wao* have? Many parts of the book take the readers to the Dominican Republic and plunge them into episodes covering almost the entire 20th-century of that Spanish-speaking Caribbean country and trigger all kinds of associations with what presumably is still the most commonly known current in modern Latin American literature, so-called magical realism – and its clichés : supernatural occurrences in the midst of societies given to violent politics and baroque excesses of all kinds. Equally obvious to readers familiar with that literature, are new features in the novel at hand, starting with its being written mostly in a rather colloquial form of contemporary American Spanglish, and moving on to its focusing on an unlikely Latino hero : a young, obese, virgin, dark-skinned, afro-haired, nerdy American of Dominican origin, living in contemporary New Jersey.

This combination of characterization and background obviously chimes in much better with McOndo, the literary protest movement started in the late 1990s that wanted to break away from the magical realism popularized during the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s, in order to allow young writers to be published, even if they wrote in new ways about the modernity of Latin American urban living. They wanted to go beyond endless variations on a mysterious folkloric life in some Macondo, the rural town described in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, that has become the archetypal Latin American locus worlwide thanks to sometimes rigid editorial preferences, media power and mostly foggy or cliché-like notions of magical realism.⁴ Surely it makes sense that contemporary writers living in large Latin American cities or in the Latin American diasporas in the USA or elsewhere, should not have to imitate their Latin American fathers – especially if we remember that the international success of the more gifted ones among the latter, was based precisely on their breaking away from the Western models that dominated the writing of their predecessors till the 1950s.⁵

One of the more convincing definitions of literary magical realism, in my eyes, was offered by comparatist Amaryll Chanady in her early 1985 study, in which she distinguished magical realism from the fantastic as narrative modes on the basis of “resolved versus unresolved antinomy” between the realistic and the supernatural codes, at work in both those forms of fiction⁶. Until then, the fantastic and magical realism, whether in European or American

4 See Fuguet for McOndoism, and Pellon, Reeds, Scheel, Zamora, Warnes *et al* for the problem of defining magical realism.

5 What also seems forgotten is that works by the likes of Carpentier, Asturias, Cortazar and Garcia Marquez were recognized as excellent for their specific literary qualities much before the notions of *realismo magico* or *real maravilloso* were used in criticism and then in marketing strategies : it took a *Time Magazine* cover in the late 1980s to turn Garcia Marquez into the so-called “father” of magical realism, which is an unsubstantiated claim, but one adopted as a *lieu commun* even in literary criticism since. Not only has such an honorary title not helped explain just what magical realism is to begin with, but it has clouded the issue because *One Hundred Years* is not a good example at all of magical realism defined as a narrative mode.

6 Chanady’s study aims at establishing a series of guidelines that will allow to distinguish between two similar and yet independent modes, and to go beyond what theorists like Roger Caillois and Tzvetan Todorov had proposed to define the fantastic. Her thesis may be summed up thusly: “Both magical realism and the fantastic are characterized by coherently developed codes of the natural and the supernatural. But while in the fantastic the supernatural is perceived as problematic, since it is patently antinomious with respect to the rational framework of the text, the supernatural in magical realism is accepted as part of reality. What is antinomious on the semantic level is resolved on the level of fiction. Authorial reticence plays an essential role in each of these two modes, but it fulfils a different function in both cases. While it

literatures had often been mixed up, even when they were distinguished from other non-realist genres such as the marvellous, surrealism, fantasy and science-fiction. In the literary samples that Chanady used to illustrate her theory, from Kafka to Garcia Marquez, via Maupassant and Cortazar, her fine textual analyses were usually based on the modal positioning towards the treatment of supernatural occurrences by mostly homogeneous narrative voices within a given work. Two things have happened since 1985 : 1) much of the more recent fiction worldwide exhibits more “postmodern” features in their narrative strategies that defy easy categorizing; and 2) magical realism has become a trendy label in “postcolonial theory” and/or cultural studies, in which new territorial lines were drawn, including by Chanady herself⁷.

Without even approaching the vexed thematic question of what is supernatural or not, formal aspects alone would make it difficult to apply Chanady's early model of magical realism to Diaz's novel, because the latter is actually a rather complex and heterogenous construction – not only of the spatial and temporal aspects of the text, but also of the narrative voices at work. With its contrasted introductory quotations (from a popular SF comic book and from a Walcott poem), its prolog, and epilog framing nine numbered and titled sections, the book constitutes what might be called a fairly chunky McOndo burger that needs plenty of mayo to stick the layers together and some additional artificial dressing to ease the bites down our gullies. The mayo appears in the guise of the explicit titles and subtitles of chapters and sections, while the dressing is provided by the distinctive cool and winning “voice” which dominates the book in such a manner that, by the end of the novel, the reader has the feeling that the whole story has been narrated retrospectively by Oscar Wao's good ole Rutgers buddy, Yunior, now turned into a responsible father and community college teacher, bent on reviving Oscar's claims to fame. We would thus be dealing with a first-person – or more technically in Genette's parlance – with an homodiegetic narrative, in which the narrator benefits from a clear authorial mandate. But matters are not nearly so simple if the book's construction is analyzed more critically.

Chapter ONE (Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World 1974-1987), the story of Oscar's childhood and adolescence, is told by a hip-dudish 3rd person omniscient anonymous narrator who seems to include himself among “those Dominican cats” that Oscar is not part of, for lack of the expected manly sex-appeal. Chapter TWO (Wildwood 1982-1985) is the first person narrative (autodiegetic) by Oscar's sister Lola of the three years she spent in exile with Abuela/La Inca, a great-aunt, in the Dominican Republic for rebelling as a New Jersey teenager against her mother.

In Chapter THREE (The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955-1962), a fairly omniscient anonymous narrator tells the ghastly story of Lola's and Oscar's mother's teenage years in the Dominican Republic, until Beli is beaten to pulp in a canefield and later put on an airplane to the USA to escape further vindictive treatment by the secret police. It is only in Chapter FOUR (Sentimental Education 1988-1992), that we meet Yunior, Oscar's roommate at Rutgers, as first-

creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and disorientation in the fantastic, if facilitates acceptance in magical realism. In the one, it makes the mysterious more unacceptable, and in the other, it integrates the supernatural into the code of the natural, which must redefine its borders” (1985, 30).

⁷ This trend was already evident in her 1995 study.

person narrator and unlikely character combination of a macho weight-lifter enrolled in creative writing.⁸ With Yuniór, himself of Dominican origin, the overall Spanish-inflected, culturally informed, yet coolly irreverent American campus talk is finally at home in the novel. It is that combination of articulate language, critical distance based on a bi-cultural background and youthful aptitude to make fun of anything (especially of all the cultural legacy schlepped over by the Latinos in their North-American ghettos) which has contaminated most other narrative voices in the book and gives it its unique, young, diaspora-colored flavor. It is Yuniór who dubs Oscar – rather unkindly and not exactly politically correctly – with the surname Wao, because he “couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (180). In any case, Oscar's unhappy sentimental education ends up with a suicidal jump off a bridge that he barely survives.

In Chapter FIVE (Poor Abelard 1944-1946), it is again an omniscient third-person narrator who tells the ghastly story of how Dr. Abelard Cabral, Oscar's grandfather, heir to one of the most respected families of fancy Bani, falls in disgrace for trying to protect his beautiful daughters from the lecherous grasp of dictator Trujillo. Abelard ends up arrested, tortured and jailed for the rest of his life, while his property is confiscated by the regime. The narration of such events is both buttressed by footnotes of a seemingly learned historical nature and undermined /lightened by irreverent authorial intrusions (of up to three pages) such as these : “Let's be honest though. The rap about the Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island. [...] Shit is really perfect. Makes for plenty of fun reading [...]. But hey, it's only a story, with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd would love” (244-246).

It might be noted that before this anonymous narrative voice takes over chapter five, the short prolog to section II of the novel (which opens with a glowing excerpt from the Dominican newspaper *La Nación*, hailing Trujillo as an “irreplaceable cosmic force”) is told again by young Lola, as her Abuela makes her return to the States, well aware that she could not control the girl any more. Lola has turned quite blasé and cynical indeed, telling us gleefully how she managed to get 2.000 dollars for “selling her culo” to the father of a school friend (205-210).

Chapter SIX (Land of the Lost 1992-1995) takes us back to Paterson, NJ, where Oscar, still a virgin and the butt of cruel jokes, now teaches at his former private school while leading a nerd's life between fantasy novels, a coke-addicted uncle at home and video games arcades. Most of the chapter deals with a León family Summer trip to the Dominican Republic, the old country that Oscar discovers for the first time. The narrator is privy to the diary modestly entitled “The condensed notebook of a return to a native land”, in which Oscar jots down that he feels he is “in Heaven”, on account of the many beautiful women in Summer attire. Unfortunately he falls in love with Ybon, described as “a semi-retired mulata puta” who lives in a neighboring house to La Inca's, and whose boyfriend, a nasty cop, happens to be very jealous. And yet, the narrator tells us that “of course the nigger [Oscar] was entertaining mad fantasies in his head...” (283). The story is then interrupted by a “Note from your author” inserted bluntly in the middle of the narrator's discourse, in which the alleged author comments drily that he knows that Negro

⁸ But then the North American “marvellous real” should have taught us that one can start as an Anglo wrestler in Maine and become the most successful magical realist writer in the USA: John Irving.

readers are going to say “that he is writing suburban tropical now”, but he goes on to defend the characterization of Ybon in tongue-in-cheek fashion : “I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix, but this is supposed to be a true account [...] Can't we believe that an Ybon can exist?...” (284-285).

Such a blatant authorial comment about the lack of verisimilitude of the story is in total (and obviously playful) contradiction with the third distinctive trait of Chanady's definition of magical realism or the fantastic, both modes relying precisely on “authorial reticence” to comment on non-verisimilitude in order to reach their goal. Credible or not, Ybon's impersonation of the object of Oscar's desire and passion gets the latter dragged into the canefields and savagely beaten by colleagues of Ybon's police-captain lover. Oscar barely survived and made it back to New Jersey only as “a complete and utter wreck” that elicits such sympathetic comments from buddy Yunior as: “Holy shit, Oscar. Holy, fucking shit!” (306)

The same Yunior all the more rightfully claims the narration of the prolog to section III as he is now shacking up with Lola, and thus even closer to events concerning the hero, who manages to fool his friend into lending him some money to return, undaunted, to woo his ladylove in the Dominican Republic. Thus Chapter SEVEN is ominously entitled The Final Voyage. Oscar's final twenty-seven days are told again by an odd mix of omniscient third-person narrator endowed with Yunior's dudish cool language, and Yunior shows up himself on the island to help Lola's and Oscar's mother Beli to reason the boy away from his suicidal courtship. But Oscar won't listen and is again walked into the canefield by the same cops who let him gallantly plead his mad cause before shooting him upon his own order by asking him what “fuego” means in English...

The remaining twelve pages of the book are a somewhat messy finale that starts with Chapter EIGHT (The End of the Story), mentions Oscar's funeral, his mother's death of cancer ten months later and the fact that no charges were ever filed against Oscar's murderers, before turning into an epilog centering on the narrator's fate. So we are told by Yunior that he was ditched by Lola after one too many infidelities, and that for years he kept being obsessed by Oscar's fate and harassed by nightmares about a no-face ghost that has appeared to most characters in the book in various horrific contexts. Yunior then brings up the fact that after ten years of a dissolute lifestyle he has now turned a new leaf, teaches creative writing at Middlesex Community College and has married a *negrita* he adores.

This eighth chapter is followed by an odd, non-titled section of a few pages that constitutes a kind of prolepsis, in which Yunior imagines the day when “Isis, Lola's daughter, will visit” (321) and he will take her to the basement to show her the four refrigerators in which he keeps all of Oscar's nerdy books, games and manuscripts” as if they constituted an archival treasure. From this hop into a distant future we are again brought back to the past. In a section entitled The Final Letter, Yunior reports about the package that arrived eight months after Oscar's death, with two manuscripts by him and a letter in which, as Yunior enthusiastically reports, Oscar claims that he had not only managed to spend a weekend with his beloved Ybon at some beach, but “Guess what? Ybon actually fucked him. Praise be to Jesus!” (334). We are thus encouraged to feel relieved that Oscar did not die a virgin but got laid – in extremis. This transcendental experience

of sex turns into an aesthetic epiphany, since the book closes with Oscar's last double exclamation: "The Beauty! The Beauty!" – a somewhat trite ending for a book that largely thematized how, even today, the life of the Dominican diaspora in contemporary North America may be affected by a dictatorial past and turn into a nightmare.

But such a reading is perhaps far too serious, for if the analysis of the narrative of *The Life of Oscar Wao* has shown anything, it is that the novel is not only deconstructed in terms of time, space, and narration, but also clearly self-derisive and iconoclastic.⁹ This meta-narrational aspect of the novel raises the question of its postmodern aspect, which in turn questions the whole notion of "magical realism" as postcolonial discourse which has clearly dominated the discussion under that label in the past twenty years or so. Thus Chanady, because "postmodern theory had made [her] increasingly suspicious of taxonomic fervor in literary criticism," felt the need in 2003 to revisit her own model of magic realism of 1985, "to dispel certain misunderstandings," mainly around the question of "antinomy between the real and the unreal, or the natural and the supernatural." She now felt that her "insistence on the coherence of the code of the supernatural was problematic", that "the binary distinction based on resolved versus unresolved antinomy was rather infelicitous and inspired by the classificatory excesses of formalism and structuralist dichotomies" (Chanady 2003, 428-431)¹⁰.

One may admire such a sincere auto-criticism without being convinced by the thesis defended, because in her review of the variety of approaches of magical realism in the criticism of the 1990s, Chanady does not offer any new element to replace the concept of antinomy that she now wanted to remove from her earlier formal definition. Essentially, she now rethinks the notion in terms of "cultural tradition and positionality" (435) and feels the need to distinguish "the quest of most magic-realist authors for the imagined postcolonial community" from the "self-critical deconstruction of rational paradigms and Western values in European and North-American philosophical discourses and narratives" (436-437). In other words, magical realism should not be used to describe both the "free-play of signs" of Western postmodernity and a more authentic reaffirmation of Latin American postcoloniality. It follows for Chanady that the label magical realism should not be used anymore for Kafka *and* Asturias or Cortazar. The latter conclusion I find impossible to stomach as a comparatist who is well aware that a writer like Garcia Marquez, whether an "authentic" Latin American magic-realist writer or not, had keenly

9 This factor raises questions about studies that consider the novel as "realistic", as a "foundational romance" or as "useful" in the realm of "empathy in health care education" as it has been suggested. See for instance Machado Sáez 2011, or Garden 2013.

10 Chanady goes on explaining that "While antinomy is explicitly thematized in the fantastic (in the restricted sense), which is governed by a strong discourse of reason in which opposites cannot be reconciled, magic realism rejects the certainties of Western reason with its dichotomies (rather than resolving them), or at least ignores the rigidity of rational codes and conventions in favor of the imagination, literary, popular or religious. A concept such as antinomy, with its strong implication of logic and rationality, is in fact irrelevant to most magic realist writing. My later work on magic realism [Chanady 1995, 14] abandons the concept of antinomy in favor of a broader reflection on the mode. In my analysis of some of the earliest critical works on magic realism in Latin America, I stressed other aspects relevant to the mode, including a "critical stance with respect to canonical rational and especially positivistic paradigms"... (433).

read not only Kafka, Faulkner and Hemingway, but probably also Marcel Aymé, a popular French magic-realist writer of the 1930s to the 1950s. Also, Chanady's qualms with “antinomy” between what is considered supernatural in the West as opposed to the Non-West have not wiped the concept off the slates.

In fact, my contention is that the new “twists” in magical realism as displayed in *The Life of Oscar Wao* and other recent successful books in Caribbean diaspora literature rely precisely on a caricature of that notion of antinomy. For what happens in the prolog-like first pages of the novel (what I have referred to as the thin top “bun” of the burger) is nothing else but a tongue-in-cheek conditioning of the reader, to instill in him the fear of superstition in its new postmodern and/or postcolonial Caribbean style : *fukù* – while playfully suggesting that such a curse might be kept at bay by the recourse to appropriate counterspells known as *zafa*. The author even expresses the hope that his very book be endowed with such supernatural powers. Afterall, the *Satanic Verses* affair has shown in striking fashion that a magic-realist novel may bring down not only curses upon its author, but even official *fatwas* sentencing the man to death, allegedly for blasphemy.

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Bearing all this in mind, can one conclude from Diaz's scathing portrayal of the historical Dominican dictator Trujillo in the first long footnote provided by the author on page 2, or from his many other comments in the texts or the footnotes about historical episodes of the Dominican Republic, that his novel is an “attempt to write a new history of the Dominican Republic” and to “document resistance” as Hanna suggests? I believe such a claim is much weakened by the hip and cheeky language used in those apparently learned footnotes¹¹ by the authorial narrator who sounds mostly like undergraduate Yunior telling us in an oralized style the fictional life of Oscar Wao. In fact, Diaz also makes fun of the pretense of realism to deal with the history of the Dominican Republic when he denounces what he perceives as major flaws in the portrayal of the Trujillo dictatorship in a novel as famous as Vargas Llosa's *The Feat of the Goat* (90).

So I agree with Hanna that Diaz makes *some* use of magical realism in his novel, but perhaps not exactly, as she claims, “to present an amplification of Dominican and United States historical reality” (516). The magical realism that came to be associated so intimately with Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years* was already an amplification – both of a reality that happened to be extremely un-realistic, and of a style celebrated for its baroque excesses – a style in tune with the late version of Alejo Carpentier's concept of the Marvelous Real. In *The Life of Oscar Wao*, we hardly have any casual intrusions of supernatural events *à la* Kafka, Marcel Aymé or Garcia Marquez. Instead, we have a story that emphasizes superstition and fear by suggesting that the historical horrors of the Trujillo dictatorship are part of an ageless curse that appears recurrently in the guise of glimpses of a mongoose or of a mysterious man without a face in various scary episodes. That is the basic narrative technique of the thriller, applied here to a family saga.

¹¹ They are or sound very informative about the historical context – *à la* Patrick Chamoiseau, as Diaz has claimed. We should be aware that Chamoiseau uses mostly pseudo-references in his footnotes and in his other forms of inserted quotations, in *Texaco* and elsewhere. They only pretend to refer to authentic documents.

I would suggest that Diaz uses a postmodern amplification – or caricature – of the antinomy we modern/Western/Westernized readers perceive between a world ruled by superstition as it is the case in the clichés of Latin American magical realism, and the contemporary McOndo-like world of the Caribbean diaspora in the USA. This amplified antinomy is reflected by – or expressed in – a discourse that does question rather aggressively the existing historiographic production about the Dominican Republic¹², but it mostly plays with a new language and a new literary style emanating from the Dominican diaspora in the USA, that we might call a “hip neo-baroque”. For, hey yes! Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a fun read.

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12 It also challenges a well-known propensity in Dominican culture to deny its negro roots and components, in a way that would have justified a distinct study focused on the question of "race and identities" as apparent in the title of this panel.

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