

Less 9/11 Is More 9/11: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *A Day and a Night and a Day*

ALBERTO S. GALINDO
WHITMAN COLLEGE

ABSTRACT: This essay brings together the novels *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by the Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz and *A Day and a Night and a Day* by the British writer Glen Duncan as fictional texts that are influenced by the cultural weight of the events of 9/11/2001 without necessarily invoking them directly: 9/11 becomes an almost unspeakable moment. This essay hypothesizes that these novels can be read as part of the cultural production tied to 9/11, not because these novels are about 9/11 *per se*, but because they are conditioned by the political and cultural discursive practices after 9/11.

Keywords: 9/11/2001, post-9/11 fiction, Junot Díaz, Glen Duncan, Judith Butler, narrative practices.

RESUMEN: este ensayo presenta las novelas *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* del escritor dominicano Junot Díaz y *A Day and a Night and a Day* del británico Glen Duncan como textos de ficción influenciados por el peso cultural de los eventos del 11 de septiembre del 2001, aunque sin invocarlos directamente y por tanto convirtiéndolos en eventos casi inenarrables. Se explora la hipótesis de que ambas novelas pueden ser leídas como parte de la producción cultural del 11 de septiembre, no por invocar ese día en particular, sino por formar parte de las prácticas políticas y discursivas pos-11/septiembre.

Palabras claves: 11 de septiembre de 2001, ficción pos-11/s, Junot Díaz, Glen Duncan, Judith Butler, prácticas discursivas.

The events of September 11th, 2001 have produced a substantial amount of fiction in English, mostly in the United States, and some in Europe. This essay brings together two novels that do not address directly, neither the events themselves nor their immediate aftermath, but rather two novels that are under

the cultural weight of 9/11 without necessarily invoking it frequently. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by the Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz and *A Day and a Night and a Day* (2009) by the British writer Glen Duncan present 9/11 as an unspeakable moment in the history of the United States.¹ 9/11 is not mentioned literally in Díaz's novel and just comes up a few times in Duncan's text, and their plots are not driven either by 9/11 as in the case of other 9/11 fiction, for example Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005).

This essay hypothesizes that the two novels studied here can be read as part of the literary production tied to 9/11, not because these novels are about 9/11 *per se*, but as part of the political and cultural discourse in the United States after 9/11. As critic Caryn James (2007) presents in her *New York Times* article on film and television, the progression of the post-9/11 «war on terror» seems to have removed the almost religious take on 9/11, and therefore cultural products, such as literature, can discuss 9/11 and allude to the events without necessarily having to pay tribute or homage to them. That is, the political discourse around 9/11 is in such a flux that writers such as Díaz and Duncan can enter the 9/11 debate regardless of an explicit mention in their texts, because 9/11 has become synonymous, or at least related, to American political excesses.

The notion of discourse invoked here, in the particular case of 9/11, comes to us through reformulations of Foucault's work, specifically through its strong presence in 9/11 discussions, as is the case of Judith Butler's 2004 essay collection, *Precarious Life*. In this collection, Butler follows Foucault and underlines the binary organization of post-9/11 America (Butler, 2004: 2), where most mainstream debates on 9/11 were mainly seen through a *us versus them* rhetoric, and where post-9/11 narrative became complicit in underlining such dichotomies.² As a result, Butler calls for narratives that could and should decentralize the strongly binary post-9/11 discourse (Butler, 2004: 18). It is within this notion of decentralization of post-9/11 narratives that this essay takes its first direction, looking to study two novels that do not participate directly in the *us versus them* debate that emerged after 9/11; these novels are seen as decentralizing the post-9/11 binary discourse, just in the way that Butler

-
1. Caryn James observes a similar trend in her article about film and television, «No One says '9/11'. No One Needs To»: «dramatic films from the smart little thriller *Civic Duty* to the Mark Wahlberg action movie *Shooter*, are routinely taking what is best described as an unspoken 9/11 approach, referring to the events without using the actual words».
 2. A fictional example of this dichotomy can be clearly seen, for example, in Brian K. Vaughan's graphic novel, *Pride of Baghdad*, where after an American bombing at the Baghdad Zoo, one of the lions asks, «Are we dead?». The answer, given by another lion, is negative, as they are clearly alive. After turning the page, another lion concludes, «we're free», highlighting the freedom that they now have, which in turn becomes evidence in the text for the American side of the binary opposition (Vaughan, 2003: 28).

describes in *Precarious Life*, as they enter the 9/11 debate through indirect and covert ways that allude to 9/11 without referencing it directly.

It is also important to note that the unspoken 9/11 addressed in this essay, as present in these two novels, does not correspond to the invisibility, conscious or not, studied through the theoretical framework of trauma theory; the characters, as far as the novels are concerned, do not deal with 9/11 or negotiate its traumatic aftermath, but rather exist in the political aftermath of those events, as will be later demonstrated in the essay.³ That is, this essay distances itself partly from post-9/11 trauma theory, or questions asked under the auspices of trauma theory as in the case, then again, of *Precarious Life*, or, on a different place on the spectrum, Jacques Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003). Butler analyzes 9/11 to delve into anti-intellectualism and censorship, but simultaneously explores trauma by asking questions about loss, grief and what she describes as *grievable* lives; she even calls for using trauma as a way to establish «more radically egalitarian international ties» (Butler, 2004: 40). Derrida, similar in style to Butler's overarching post-9/11 concerns also touches on trauma to underline the «traumatism [that] is produced by the future, by the to come» (Derrida, 2003: 97). Furthermore, trauma studies and questions on trauma have not only yielded responses such as the ones presented by public intellectuals like Butler and Derrida, but also by a wide-ranging list of articles built on trauma theory, as in Karen Randell's study, via Cathy Caruth's seminal *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), on the absence of direct references to 9/11 in the cultural production related to the events.⁴

In the case of post 9/11 fiction, this same binary discourse, as a result of the national trauma caused by the events on 9/11, can be observed in many 9/11-related novels, as is the case of characters that leave New York City as a direct consequence of avoiding the trauma of 9/11 as much as possible. Characters in novels such as Philip Roth's *Everyman* (2006) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), as well as Helen Schulman's *A Day at the Beach* (2007), escape the city and its geography in direct correlation to the traumatic effects of 9/11. Such stance is clearly articulated in novels such as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*: «Now that I, too have left that city [of New York], I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath [...] None of this means that I wish I were back there

3. Consider, for example, Randell's approach to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*: «The absence of the sight of 9/11 trauma in *Fahrenheit 9/11* draws our attention to the 'unrepresentable' status of the attack» (Randell, 2005: 196).

4. Other studies that focus on trauma as a point of entry into 9/11 include David Simpson's *The Culture of Commemoration* (2006). Simpson is interested in the relationship between 9/11-related death and the processes of memorialization; as well as commemoration as a response to questions about trauma and its representation.

[in New York] now» (O'Neill, 2008: 4). That is, the approach to 9/11 as trauma and through questions about trauma is present and strong in the work of public intellectuals such as Butler while simultaneously being a concern in post-9/11 fiction. In contrast to these direct references to 9/11 and issues centered on trauma, this essay will discuss the ways in which 9/11 is unspoken and unraveled in these texts.

1. A Faceless History: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao opens with two epigraphs, one from the Marvel comic book, *Fanstastic Four*, and one from the poem «The Schooner Flight» by Nobel-laureate Derek Walcott. Both epigraphs, crucial to this essay, can be read as reflections on language and its multiple uses in the construction of narratives that decentralize 9/11. The first one reads: «Of what import are brief, nameless lives [...] to Galactus?». The second epigraph is a longer quote that ends by stating: «I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation». Thus, the epigraphs put together a series of problems that the novel will address especially in terms of the construction of a discourse that is both personal and political, as well as the complex linguistic and social problems that can arise from such discourse, and which eventually can be read as part of the novel's take on the personal and the political after 9/11.

From Walcott's «either I'm a nobody, or I'm a nation», the novel proceeds to introduce the space of the Dominican Republic and its capital, Santo Domingo. The country is described on the first page as «the Ground Zero of the New World» (Díaz, 2007: 1), making an ambiguous reference either to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or to the more recent use of the phrase to describe the site of the World Trade Center in New York after 9/11.⁵ In that first page of the novel, the narrator contributes to the historical and political character of the text by introducing a narrative called «fukú americanus», described as a «curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World» (Díaz, 2007: 1). From this first page onwards, Díaz narrates the origins of the *fukú* or curse within the Dominican imaginary, traced all the way back to the past and «the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola [which] unleashed the *fukú* on the world» (Díaz, 2007: 1). In a few sentences, the narrator moves forward to the 20th century and explains that «in my parents' day the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person would believe in». The meaning of this curse,

5. As Simpson notes in *The Culture of Commemoration*, the term «9/11» itself as well as «Ground Zero», invoked here have been naturalized, normalized and incorporated into language without any questions (Simpson, 2006: 17).

according to the novel, has a long historical tradition, which is then embodied in the historical figure of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, «our then dictator-for-life» (Díaz, 2007: 2).⁶

The core narrative problem of the *fukú* becomes twofold in the novel: the novel seeks to understand its unknown political and historical origins, while exploring its contemporary development in the Americas as lived by Oscar Wao and his family in the Dominican Republic and the United States. That is, these first pages as well as the use of the *fukú* as a narrative trope and historical thread set the tone of the novel and allow it to oscillate in time through different historical moments of the global political discourse of the United States. This range in terms of historical time becomes crucial to reading the novel in terms of a post-9/11 discourse: it calls attention to the need for historicity before and after 9/11.

The *fukú* serves multiple narrative purposes throughout the text that simultaneously engages with a political discourse that ties the United States to the Dominican Republic. Early in the text, the so-called curse of the Kennedy family is explained as a *fukú* on them as the result of the attempt to assassinate Trujillo, the U.S.-backed dictator of the Dominican Republic, in 1961: «[...] Who killed JFK? [...] It was Trujillo; it was the *fukú*» (Díaz, 2007: 4). The narrator will continue to invoke the *fukú* throughout the novel in order to explain the inexplicable, or to revisit myths or beliefs such as the Kennedy curse, or to give meaning or narrative logic to a set of events. The *fukú* is also used to categorize narratives. The entire plot of the novel, described by the narrator as *fukú*, is considered science fiction and fantasy by the title character of Oscar: «What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?» (Díaz, 2007: 6). That is, the political and historical discourse of both countries is marked by an amount of violence beyond belief, that the characters can only place it within the world of strange phenomena, be it science-fiction, myth, legend or *fukú*. To highlight this, the text makes an immediate reference to Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo – his famous town of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other texts –, as well as the ironic McOndo created in the 1996 manifesto by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, which refers to a town populated by McDonald's and Mac computers. The narrator is very much aware of the narrative complexity of the events about to be told, as well as the weight of contemporary events such as 9/11, and therefore invokes the trope of the *fukú* as his guiding principle into the narrative of this political discourse. Simultaneously, the reference to Macondo and McOndo allows the narrator to

6. «No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*» (Díaz, 2007: 3).

invoke the tradition of magical realism or the tradition against it, while generating his style and mode of narrating the historical and hence political background of Oscar Wao's family. Such narrative technique, arguing in favor and against a tradition, can possibly lead to destabilizing both sides of the binary – magical realism and everything not magical realist, in this case –, which becomes a useful mechanism for also decentralizing the post-9/11 binary of pro-Americanism and everything not pro-American, labeled earlier in this essay as the *us versus them* rhetoric.

The Brief Wondrous Life is then the story of the *fukú*, a curse used to explain the past, present and future of the Dominican Republic and the life of Oscar and his family. It is also the *zafa*, that is, the counter spell to the curse of the *fukú*. As Yunior, the narrator, states, «Even as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts» (Díaz, 2007: 7). The *fukú* and the *zafa*, the spell and counterspell, are then used as attempts to narrate and understand the respective doing and undoing of history through language, constructing the narrative of the country that Beli Cabral describes as the «un-country» of the Dominican Republic (Díaz, 2007: 128). The narrator then uses the introductory pages of the text to set the tone of the historical questions to be asked, the pressing issue of the role of language in the narration of history, and the ways in which the characters in the story will negotiate those questions. If these historical and political problems are to be experienced and thought as *fukú*, then the narrator eloquently proposes that the pages to follow, the rest of the novel, might just be the reversal of that curse, the trope of the *zafa* (Díaz, 2007: 7). The story and history of this *un-country* is not organized chronologically and the beginnings of the family narrative are not fully introduced until chapter five. The *un-country* almost requires a different sense of time, in this case, outside linear chronology. Furthermore, the narrator even notes in chapter five that:

[...] there are other beginnings certainly, better ones to be sure – if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards «discovered» the New World – or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916 – but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography (Díaz, 2007: 211).

The narrator chooses not to start with the beginnings of the family, but with the concept of the *fukú* in the introduction prior to the first chapter. It is this introduction that dialogues with 9/11 and with the discourse of American politics by claiming, simply and in parentheses, that «(Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq)» (Díaz, 2007: 4). It could be claimed that this reference to Iraq is tied to Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991) rather than to the more recent Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-present). But, the publication of the novel in

2007 as well as the never ending aspect of the precarious relationship with both the Iraq and the Dominican Republic seems to strongly suggest that the comparison is attached to the most recent example of American interventionism in the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, the text goes back into larger historical notion of the curse of the *fukú* by trying to unfold its beginnings; on the other hand, the narrator presents the political past of the Dominican Republic in correlation to the particular present context of another American occupation, threading the political history of American interventionism through fiction.

The beginning of the story of the *fukú* introduces the character of Oscar in the first chapter. Oscar is a Dominican kid growing in New Jersey and his use of language – mostly English inflected with some Spanish speech patterns and idioms – informs his identity politics, almost as expected. Oscar's *bildungsroman* is constantly under question, especially because his physical appearance faces constant scrutiny. His afro presents him as Puerto Rican to other Dominicans; his inability to dance and lack of rhythm again seems to make him anything but Dominican; his complexion makes his uncle describe him as Haitian. Oscar can only reply to these suspicions that he is indeed Dominican, contrary to the eye of the beholder: «But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy» (Díaz, 2007: 49). It is in language, in this case, the Spanish language, that Oscar seeks to try to construct that national identity that has been questioned. As Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel sharply proposes in her study of *Drown*, in *Caribe two ways*, even though Spanish surfaces in Díaz's fiction as another mechanism to get to the questions of the missing father – a question also present in *The Brief Wondrous Life* –, it is in English that that search for identity – and a father – can take place (Martínez San Miguel, 2003: 375). Díaz himself claimed in an interview with Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, years before *The Brief Wondrous Life*, that the use of Spanish in his work «without the benefit of italics or quotation marks» (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, 2000: 904), as in Oscar's case as well as any other Spanish-speaking character in the novel, corresponds to a politics of the porous borders between languages. This permeability between languages extends beyond Oscar's limited Spanish and fluent English into Elvish, the languages of the elves created by J. R. R. Tolkien. This third language further complicates the expected image of Dominican Oscar. The narrator even confronts Oscar's Elvish skills when he finds a poster on the door of their shared dorm room. The poster uses the language to state the following: «*Speak, friend, and enter*»; the narrator immediately adds: «(Please don't ask me how I knew this. Please.)» (Díaz, 2007: 172, writer's emphasis). Again, the use of the parenthesis, as in the case of describing Santo Domingo as Iraq, is reserved for almost unspoken moments that cannot be uttered outside the parenthesis. The history of the Dominican Republic as well as Oscar's history is commented upon in these parenthetical notes or footnotes, which in turn work as a marginal

commentary to the main narrative, as exactly done with the reference to post-9/11 American interventionism.

Oscar's ongoing search for self, or at least an image of self, works its way through the novel. In chapter four, Yunior, the novel's narrator, again confronts Oscar. This chapter questions Oscar's ethnic and national identity again, since he «talked like a *Star Trek* computer!» (Díaz, 2007: 175). Yunior does so in Spanish, as it had happened previously: «Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am» (Díaz, 2007: 180). Oscar's response in English is juxtaposed to his earlier response in Spanish to the same question. The concern around Oscar's identity, both physically and linguistically, is explored further in the paragraph, when he decides to dress up as Doctor Who for Halloween. The result of his costume was rather a «fat homo Oscar Wilde», which is immediately misunderstood as Oscar Wao (Díaz, 2007: 180). Then, Oscar, the teenager that insists on his Dominican ethnicity, is then briefly reconfigured in the novel as Oscar Wilde, but instantly made into parody as Wao, which phonetically also alludes to the interjection *wow*. Oscar Wao, the kid who dreamed of becoming the Dominican Tolkien, then is negotiating Spanish and English, the D.R. and the U.S., the *fukú* and the *zafa*, but also the border zone between narrative genres. That is, the political intersection between Spanish and English, along with the national ties that they have for Oscar, is also complicated because of the Elvish. The novel shifts in terms of its genre, oscillating from the influence of the fantasy genre – via Tolkien –, the comic book and poetry of the epigraphs, the historical fiction narrated of the text, and the historical footnotes spread throughout the novel.

The political uses of these languages in the novel, particularly the code-switching between English and Spanish, are present in the text mostly for emphasis, as in the case of Oscar's interactions with his mother: «Tú ta llorando por una muchacha?» [You're crying for a girl?] (Díaz, 2007: 14). The verb *está*, third person present of the verb *to be*, is contracted into one syllable, *ta*, in order to achieve a kind pronunciation that makes language more concise just by eliminating the first syllable. The juxtaposition with such contraction comes again by way of a footnote, when the narrator decides to explain the use of a term in Spanish for the English-only reader. That is not the case of the previous quote: the reader is left at bay without knowledge of Spanish. This power in the use of Spanish in the text demonstrates the politics behind the novel. Some moments are exclusive to readers of Spanish, and furthermore, some moments are limited to those with understanding of Dominican Spanish. In other situations, Yunior will take the time to explain a term or phrase from Spanish, as for example *parigüayo*, misspelled in the text with a superfluous dieresis over the vowel *u* (Díaz, 2007: 19). Spelling aside, Oscar is described as the neighborhood *parigüayo*, «the kid who don't dance, who ain't got game» (Díaz, 2007: 20). The

term is defined in the accompanying footnote as a «corruption of the English neologism ‘party watcher’», that was in turn originated to talk about Marines during «the first American Occupation of the D.R., which ran from 1916 to 1924». The footnote initially seems as just an etymological explanation of the Spanish word, but simultaneously achieves a political turn by mentioning the United States presence in the Dominican Republic. That is, the use of Spanish and its humorous English explanation immediately invoke U.S. excesses in the country, which in turn relates back to «Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq». In this example, the novel makes a quick parallel between pre-9/11 American military interventions and the post-9/11 ones. Subsequently, the narrator asks in parenthesis, «(You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.)» (Díaz, 2007: 19). This parenthetical aside has the same decentralizing effect as the previous one: it is critical of American interventionism, which would initially be assigned to the anti-American part of the binary, but most importantly, in its criticism of a possible incomplete notion of pre-9/11 and post-9/11 American history, it highlights that 9/11 did not «change everything» as had been forecasted.⁷ The text then uses the Spanish language, in this case the word *parigüayo*, as the point of entry to address the uses of languages in the narratives of history. It goes from the Spanish neologism to the English one, from past American interventions in the Dominican Republic, to the recent and current American ones in Iraq.

Lola, Oscar’s sister, undergoes the same question of identity politics and its construction through language. Her mother describes her as «Que muchacha tan fea» [What an ugly girl], and Lola resigns to accepting that «Fea’s [Ugly has] become my new name» (Díaz, 2007: 54). Of course, language ends up fulfilling its initial naming responsibility.

The third chapter, for example, goes back to the Dominican Republic to trace the origins of Belicia Cabral, Oscar and Lola’s mother, while simultaneously tracing the *fukú* of the family. Beli’s past is narrated through three major romantic relationships which constituted her initial downfall: «A romantic she was, but not a pendeja [stupid]» (Díaz, 2007: 111). The sentence condenses the counterpoint of Beli’s narrative in the Dominican Republic by juxtaposing her romantic history, in English, with ways of understanding her own narrative, in Spanish. The narrator initially tries to unfold Beli’s narrative by exploring her love affair with a character known as the Gangster.

7. Consider, for example, the epigraph to Alissa Torres’s autobiographic graphic novel, *American Widow*, where the post-9/11 sentiment that «everything had changed» and that «nothing would ever be the same» is clearly present: «Everything the people of Beslan thought they knew about living, his aunt said, had changed. She rubbed bits of the filament of eggshell onto the boy’s blisters and burns, and said the lesson was indelible: ‘We never knew how happy we were’» (Torres, 2008).

Simultaneously, the narrator is unable to tell the Gangster's story because Beli has withheld most of the information concerning her former lover from her version of the story. The narrator explains this problem with his «sources» by mentioning that «I'll give you what I've managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the days the páginas en blanco [empty pages] finally speak» (Díaz, 2007: 119). The narrator, then, is in the constant search to fill the *páginas en blanco*, to narrate the incomplete origins and to unfold the history of the *fukú* that affects Beli and her family.

Beli's narrative expands in historical terms in a twofold manner: the Gangster frequently travels to Cuba during Fulgencio Batista's regime (1940-1944 and 1952-1959); she becomes pregnant by the Gangster, who in turn is married to Trujillo's sister, «the one known affectionately as La Fea», another character named as the ugly one (Díaz, 2007: 138). Thus, Beli becomes part of the historical narrative of the Dominican Republic through the figure of the Gangster, as he is part of the Trujillo clan, while being simultaneously linked to a pre-Revolution Cuba. La Fea Trujillo then visits Beli to inform her that she will have to undergo a forced abortion and therefore not have the Gangster's baby. In this moment of drama, violence and uncertainty, Beli sees a faceless man: «Déjame [Leave me alone], she screamed, and when she looked up she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn't have a face*. All the strength fell out of her» (Díaz, 2007: 141, writer's emphasis). Beli is then beaten up and the text describes this moment as, «all that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope» (Díaz, 2007: 147). This is a turning point in the text as Beli survives the violence and the end of language that could describe such violence. Beli bears the weight of the Trujillo family on her, via La Fea and the Gangster under Trujillo's excessive power, while enduring the U.S.. endorsement and support of Trujillo. The burden of Dominican and American disproportionate brutality is suddenly thrown upon Oscar's mother. The moment simultaneously allows the narrator to question whether Beli and the rest of her family were victims of a «high-level fukú» (Díaz, 2007: 152) or «an A-plus zafa» (Díaz, 2007: 155). This question of narrating history either as a curse or a counter-spell is presented all together with the assassination of Trujillo, which takes place on the same night that Beli was beaten. The violence of the fiction meets the violence in history, and such an encounter is manifested in the novel through a faceless man. This moment of violence resonates with the violence encountered by Socorro when she dreams of a faceless man after the atomic bombs in Japan. The faceless man, later seen in the novel in relation to the violence of atomic bombs in Japan, becomes a trope to continue questioning whether he is the *fukú* of history or its *zafa*, whether violence does history or undoes it: this reflection becomes an indirect yet possible way of reading post-9/11 political practices.

Díaz's use of faceless characters is not new to *The Brief Wondrous Life*: two of the short stories from his collection, *Drown*, include a boy with a disfigured face. In «Ysrael» and «No Face», the somewhat faceless boy becomes a metaphor for an almost faceless identity. Anne Connor's detailed essay on both stories strongly propose that such disfigured character can be read both as «an allegory of the suffering of an entire people» by invoking the land of Israel, as well as an expression of «the experience of being a minority» (Connor, 2002: 153). If Connor's argument may prove to be persuasive with regard to the identity politics woven through *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life* does not present characters with disfigured faces, but rather faceless men who only seem to appear in moments of extreme violence, like Beli's beating or the atomic bombs. With this facelessness, the novel seems to bring to attention a certain faceless witness to the violence that these characters endure. Facelessness is present while history is happening and *un-happening*, as if Beli's encounter with a violent history becomes real and simultaneously becomes an event that she must forget. The same tactic of happening and *un-happening* is not suggested towards 9/11, but becomes a possible way of reading and thinking 9/11 and its aftermath, of decentralizing the binary notion that forgetfulness would simply fall in the category against pro-Americanism.

This doing and undoing of history not only happens through the switch of Spanish and English linguistic codes, but also through the creation of neologisms to describe the political and historical situation of these characters. It is as if either language does not suffice and a new set of words or code needs to be created, as in the description of Trujillo as a *culocrat* (Díaz, 2007: 155). The neologism initially alludes to the tradition of Spanglish, but it is more a playful take on the Spanish word for *backside* and words that can take the *-crat* suffix, as for example, from *autocrats* to *democrats*.

The figure of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo allows the narrator to create neologisms such as *culocrat* and *culocracy*, but also becomes a productive trope that allows for the construction of a historical narrative centered on Trujillo himself, while marking the text with a somewhat ironic tone. The figure of Trujillo has received a similar center stage treatment in novels such as Julia Alvarez's hated dictator *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) and Mario Vargas Llosa's incontinent dictator in *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000).⁸ Through the figure of Trujillo, the narrator introduces the reconstruction of solemn historical terms such as the Iron Curtain, which in turn becomes the lighter *Plátano* Curtain in the text. This historical reconstruction, as the narrator sees it, results in «a true

8. Consider, for example, an instance from *In the Time of the Butterflies*: «I had turned back towards the door when one of them called 'Viva Trujillo!' the 'patriotic' way of beginning and closing the day. I wasn't going to invoke the devil's name in my own yard» (Alvarez, 1995: 262).

border on the countries, a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people» (Díaz, 2007: 225). This border that exists beyond maps references partly emphasizes the extension of Trujillo's political power over the history and politics of the D.R., but it also alludes to constant negotiations in language, including code-switching and humorous neologisms.

The violent and serious end of the Era of Trujillo brings the end of the less somber *culocracy* (Díaz, 2007: 217) and Plátano Curtain (Díaz, 2007: 161), while Beli's story achieves a grim narrative turn when La Inca sends her away to Nueva York, to «the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora» (Díaz, 2007: 164). In New York and New Jersey, Beli maintains her gravitas and keeps silent – she does not even want to tell her past to Yunior so that he can incorporate it in his novel. Beli is a sharp contrast with the funny-looking, Elvish-speaking Oscar, who in an act of defiance against the *fukú* of Trujillo, goes back to the Dominican Republic. He even challenges the word of the curse itself and plays with the word *fukú* until he comes up with «*Fuck you*» (Díaz, 2007: 304). Oscar encounters his *fukú* and is violently killed in the D.R., paralleled by the appearance of the faceless figure in a dream of Yunior's (Díaz, 2007: 325). The history of violence cannot show its face and is not to be clearly seen or understood, but can definitely show its body. With Beli and Oscar dead, Yunior is the one left to deal with the face that has been taken off violently from history, and to give it some kind of face while reconstructing the brief wondrous history of Oscar Wao. Simultaneously, Yunior is also left to reconstruct a larger history, that of the U.S., even if its in passing and in its post-9/11 context.

The more Oscar's family genealogy is narrated in the text, the more evident the burden of American politics, pre- and post-9/11, in the text becomes. That is, Beli moves to the United States due to violence of the American-endorsed Trujillo era, and creates her family on U.S. soil with a clear and present influence from Dominican politics though. It is not that 9/11 is entirely absent from *The Brief Wondrous Life*, but it rather is unspoken, almost retracted. The novel suggests in its introduction that the shadow of 9/11 imbues the rest of the text, and therefore the discursive practices within the text – parenthetical remarks, code-switching, and the metaphor of a faceless history – demonstrate the effects of 9/11 in the reading of the novel.

2. *A Day and a Night and a Day* and the Question of Atrocity

Glen Duncan's *A Day and a Night and a Day* (2009) is another recent fictional text that does not mention 9/11, but can be read under the political and historical effects of the aftermath of those events, very much in the same line that

this essay proposes that *The Brief Wondrous Life* could be read. The text opens with Augustus Rose, a half-white and half-black man from East Harlem in New York City, who is hiding in an island off Scotland after escaping from being accused of terrorism. Augustus, like Oscar and Yunior in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is a person of color – «black or semi-black» (Duncan, 2009: 4), or «Afro-Italian?» (Duncan, 2009: 23) –, a seeming rarity in post-9/11 American fiction, ranging for example from Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007): «Many nights he fell asleep praying he'd wake up white» (Duncan, 2009: 16). This racial politics, absent and muted in novels that seem to operate in a somewhat post-racial, post-9/11 America, such as *The Believers* and *The Emperor's Children*, are a key component to Duncan's text, similarly to Díaz's exploration of identity politics in his novel. Such an identity politics, although crucial to the construction of the characters, does not override its respective novels. As Jesse Alemán (2008: 401) writes with regard to David Cowart's chapter on *Drown*, «the writer does not linger in the kind of postcolonial mantra that typifies ethnic American literature». Furthermore, Alemán's observation about a pre-9/11 immigrant fiction with different ethnic and racial concerns, in contrast to a post-9/11 literary world (Alemán, 2008: 402) has become quite relevant for this essay. Both *The Brief Wondrous Life* and *A Day and a Night* do call attention to their characters' non-white ethnicity, in sharp contrast to the novels already mentioned, and then proceed to navigate larger questions of history, violence and language.

Augustus's third-person narration of his own life in the hideaway island is constantly interrupted by flashlights of his time in a cell, where an interrogator, Harper, questioned him about all his alleged terrorist work. Harper explains in his torture/interrogation sessions that, according to his investigation, Augustus has been working his way up a terrorist cell in Spain in order to find the people behind a bomb explosion in Barcelona. Harper is frequently aware of the serious and comedic narrative mechanisms at work either in his investigations or his work as a torturer/investigator. He even uses such troubled humor to comment on 9/11 in his torture/interrogation sessions with Augustus: «The top priority should be getting the conspiracy 9/11 story out as a movie» (Duncan, 2009: 114), or «The Chomskyites and bleeding hearts took 9/11 as an opportunity to educate the world about America's atrocities» (Duncan, 2009: 189). Between Harper and Augustus, 9/11 is only one of many topics that the former brings up. He talks frequently about working and living by «scripts»,⁹ and observes that everyone

9. Harper, for example, comments to Augustus: «This is the vendetta script. We like this. This is personal. We see this. Who'd you lose in the explosion?» (Duncan, 2009: 21).

lives under a «representational saturation».¹⁰ He even manages to joke about grammar in the specific context of violent, post-9/11 discursive practices:

The twentieth-first century's the century of the definite article. You don't need to describe or evoke, you just name it and put 'the' in front of it. It's like compressed data files: The suburban nightmare. The dirty war. The mom who knew. *The torture victim who* [...] one way or another transcends, finds God or love or the violin or forgiveness of his torturer. (Duncan, 2009: 15-16, writer's emphasis)

The more he continues his tirade, the grimmer it becomes, while also more amusing in its incisiveness. Harper sarcastically continues against post-9/11 practices, what he calls «this tired franchise», borrowing from a review of the movie *Superman Returns*.¹¹ He goes on and on, discussing from the new prevalence of surveillance to Jean Baudrillard's famous comment about a secret American desire for 9/11 to happen.¹² Immediately after Harper's monologue, the novel's narrator proceeds to explain in the subsequent paragraph that, «the virus in this conversation for Augustus is that he knows it's going to end» (Duncan, 2009: 30). The metaphor invoked here, «the virus in this conversation,» refers to the torture of Augustus and his possible subsequent death, which does not actually happen. He survives the torture but he is incapable, even at the very last pages of the novel, to separate his current-day narrative from the torture experience. Torture, constructed metaphorically as a virus in the aforementioned quote, does indeed take over the rest of his narrative.

Harper's constant criticism of post-9/11 American politics is a twofold discursive operation, and becomes a clear example of Butler's notion of post-9/11 decentralized narratives. He operates from within U.S.-sanctioned counterterrorism tactics and implements such tactics while he incessantly satirizes the discourse around them. It reads as if Harper had been reading Butler's plea for decentralizing the binary post-9/11 debate. The fascinating aspect of this novel's take on Harper is that his criticism of both post-9/11 bourgeois liberal practices as well as neoliberal conservative ones finds a double

10. Harper had also stated: «We've written too many books, made too many movies. By the time you're eighteen you've already encountered representations of everything important, you already know the scripts. It's no wonder we're so limp» (Duncan, 2009: 15).

11. Harper's first use of this phrase takes place early on in the novel: «I was reading a movie review the other day, *Superman Returns*. It had the phrase 'this tired franchise.' Sometimes you get a big articulation from an absurd little context—because that's what the world is right now, a tired franchise. The whole business of being born and working and screwing and getting ill and dying. I'm not just talking about the west. Primitives with clay hair and peyote visions are a tired franchise. Plus you look hard enough one of them's wearing a diver's watch or an Adidas shirt» (Duncan, 2009: 29).

12. Harper seemingly agrees with the statement: «Then Baudrillard says the U.S. secretly wished for 9/11 and everyone jumps on him. It's hardly a stretch» (Duncan, 2009: 30).

refutation in Augustus. Augustus's bourgeois liberalism is evident in the life that he leads when he escapes Morocco after inheriting a chain of lucrative New York restaurants from his mother. He can afford to live far and away because he has the resources to do so. Simultaneously, Augustus works as a terrorist double agent, working for the United States by infiltrating a Muslim terrorist cell. But, the more he enters into the terrorist world, the more seduced he is by Muslim practices – «the fundamentalists might be crazy but they're not anorexics or credit card junkies» (Duncan, 2009: 189) –. So, Augustus stands at the respective centers of the ideological apparatuses that Harper adamantly assesses: Augustus works for the U.S. under its never-ending political prowess – which clearly seems to exclude the Muslim practices that fascinate him.

A Day and a Night challenges the discourse of post-9/11 U.S. politics, very much in line with Butler's argument in *Precarious Life*, because Augustus is interested in both liberalism and some kind of Islamist extremism. The atrocity of such a contradiction is supposed to be avoided, like the aforementioned viral metaphor. The question of atrocity in the novel is well put together as the novel constantly asks which of these ideologies, and their respective metaphors and practices, is stronger, which is ethical, or which is more desirable. Of course, Augustus's ongoing, internal debate about his ideological practices is marked by the use of torture *by* Augustus and *on* Augustus. He has inflicted extreme physical pain on others and is the victim of such pain as well. The atrocious aspect of torture, as presented in the novel, is criticized by Harper as expected: «Suspicion of atrocity is an aphrodisiac to the liberal conscience, proof of atrocity its climax. But the atrocity itself brings a kind of detumescence. It's the nature of horror: you've got to *half*-see it for it to work» (Duncan, 2009: 35). The discourse on the state of being atrocious, like contagion, almost by definition, is to be feared or rejected, yet the text presents the need for atrocity, the need for violence.

This call for violence is unmistakable when Harper ends up gouging Augustus's eye with the handle of a spoon:

You think in spite of all available evidence to the contrary the universe will draw the line at your eye, which has seen your whole precious waking life, but the universe is in no position to grant exceptions. The universe is the perfect ideologue. (Duncan, 2009: 144)

This moment of torture, the gouging of the eye, can be thought of as one of the ultimate acts of any kind of extreme ideological practice that believes in torture. The act in itself emerges as an example for the ideological apparatus against it. A very similar set of violent events take place under Trujillo in *The Brief Wondrous Life*, such as the torture of Beli and the murder of the Mirabal

sisters.¹³ The paragraph continues unto a reflection on the relationship between the politics of torture and the politics of language: «Language cooperates. Language astonishes with its fidelity: *my eye*. Disbelief keeps surging: How can it be your eye if they've forced it out? How can your eye suddenly be and object first and your eye second?» (Duncan, 2009: 144). The question of language is raised here not because of its insufficiency to describe the horrors of war, but because it is in language that Augustus's intersection between ideologies takes place. The question of language, as with code-switching in *The Brief Wondrous Life*, becomes vital to the narrative of both novels, proposing ways of questioning the relationship between language, ideology and politics in a post-9/11 world.

Another reference to post-9/11 politics in *A Day*, as in Díaz's novel, comes via the U.S. intervention in Iraq: «Why did the MPs *take* the [Abu Ghraib] photos? Because everyone back home, in a collective surge of self-doubt, had asked them to» (Duncan, 2009: 156). The causes or historical background to 9/11/2001 are not narrated or referenced in either novel, which are concerned with the effects of the events in the lives of characters such as Augustus, Harper or Yúnior. Even more so, both novels propose a reading that is indeed marked by post-9/11 discursive practices, as this essay has tried to illustrate.¹⁴

These novels invite a reflection about 9/11 without putting the events center stage or even mentioning them consistently. They seem to propose that a more nuanced analysis of 9/11 and post-9/11 discursive practices can be done in parentheses, through code-switching or through the irony of having an American torturer/interrogator become the most razor-sharp critic of post-9/11 nationalist discourse and its excesses. These mechanisms allow for a decentralization of binary post-9/11 narrative practices and for other points of entry into the language, politics, and novels of 9/11.

13. The murder of the «three beautiful sisters from Salcedo who resisted Trujillo and were murdered for it (Díaz, 2007: 83) is briefly narrated in Díaz's novel as well as in Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del Chivo*. Their murder is the main plot of Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

14. On a final note, what these novels do well, differently from more overt fictional narrations of 9/11, is to generate a reader that can read an unspeakable 9/11. A study of this critical reader, outside the scope of this essay, created by minor references to post-9/11 politics, but also through the narrative structures used to make such references, would be worthy of further study. Both novels question political uses of language and the relationship – and hence politics – between language and time. Even though 9/11 is a moment prior to these texts, there seems to be a correlation between the destabilizing forces of the events to the point of subverting chronological narrative. None of the novels takes place in a post-9/11 New York, unlike many other post-9/11 fictions. *A Day* is divided between Morocco and Britain, and *The Brief Wondrous Life* oscillates between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, even though it spends limited time in New York. Their location seems to allow them the geographic distance that other novels do not have, and therefore can afford an unspeakable 9/11 rather than a more vocal and unconcealed political discourse.

Works Cited

- ALEMÁN, J.** (2008): «Barbarous tongues: Immigrant fiction and ethnic voices in contemporary american literature», *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54(2): 398-404.
- ALVAREZ, J.** (1995): *In the Time of the Butterflies*, New York, Plume.
- BUTLER, J.** (2004): *Precarious Life*, London, Verso.
- CARUTH, C.** (1995): *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- (1996): *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- CÉSPEDES, D.; S. TORRES-SAILLANT** (2000): «Fiction Is the Poor Man's Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz», *Callaloo*, 23(3): 892-907.
- CONNOR, A.** (2002): «Desemascarando a Ysrael: The Disfigured Face as Symbol of Identity in Three Latino Texts», *Cincinnati Romance Review*, 21: 148-162.
- DERRIDA, J.** (2003): «Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides», in **BORRADORI, G.** (ed) (2003): *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 85-136.
- DÍAZ, J.** (2007): *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, New York, Riverhead Books.
- DUNCAN, G.** (2009): *A Day and a Night and a Day*, New York, Harper Collins.
- JAMES, C.** (2007) «No One Says '9/11' No One Needs To», *The New York Times*, 13 May.
- MARTÍNEZ SAN MIGUEL, Y.** (2003): *Caribe two ways: cultura de la migración en el Caribe hispánico*, San Juan, Ediciones Callejón.
- O'NEILL, J.** (2008): *Netherland*, New York, Pantheon Books.
- RANDELL, K.** (2005): «Speaking the unspeakable: Invisibility and trauma after 9/11» in **COULTER-SMITH, G.; M. OWEN** (eds.) (2005): *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, London, Paul Holberton. 195-205.
- SIMPSON, D.** (2006): *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- TORRES, A.** (2008): *American Widow*, New York, Random House.
- VAUGHAN, B.** (2006): *Pride of Baghdad*, New York, Vertigo.