***The man without a face – excerpts***

***Interview with Junot Diaz on GoodReads:***

***GR*: Goodreads member** [**Meredith Watts**](http://www.goodreads.com/user/show/537205) **was enchanted by the window into Dominican culture and asks, "I would like to know the meaning of the mongoose and the man with no face, two magical elements of the book. [Are you] willing to point us to a myth or another source?"**

*JD*: That is a wild question. First of all, I think that's a wonderful question. Second, those are the parts of the book that require the reader's participation. Depending on how you answer the question, "Who and what are the mongoose and who and what is the man with no face?" reshapes the entire book. If I provide the answer, it robs the reader of their role. I will say that the novel argues that the mongoose is an alien from another planet. Whether you wish to agree with that or not is up to you. The man with no face is far more mysterious and will require far more reflection. I based the talking mongoose on a character that appears in a young adult novel called [Flight to the Lonesome Place](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2044433.Flight_To_The_Lonesome_Place) by [Alexander Key](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/231914.Alexander_Key), the same author who wrote the [Witch Mountain](http://www.goodreads.com/series/86454-witch-mountain) books. In it there was a talking alien mongoose. I loved it.

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Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot

Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Richard Patteson

The face is the most immediately visual sign of an individual’s identity. It is also a kind of text; we often speak of “reading” someone’s face. The recurrence within Yunior’s text of the man without a face is disturbing because it is closely associated with the frightening implications of blankness and erasure.

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Each manifestation embodies a nameless, faceless horror, not only of the anonymous apparatchik (or in this case matón) knocking at the door but of the message he delivers: silence, blankness, and an end to meaning. When the faceless man appears for the last time in the novel, in one of Yunior’s dreams, he emerges from an area of his subconscious in which Oscar’s story and his own have grown very close together. This final manifestation is an echo, and also perhaps another kind of narrative reconstruction, of a dream Oscar has while recovering from his first beating: “An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar’s eyes to focus, but then he saw that the book was blank” (302)….

As dreams often do, Oscar’s nightmare seems to lay one signification on top of another, from the terrifying faceless men of family legend to the anonymity forced on his own grandfather. Yunior’s version takes the shift from perpetrator to victim a step further in identifying the faceless man with the blank book as Oscar himself. The dread inspired by his recognition has its roots in Drown’s Ysrael, the first “No Face” (Díaz, Drown 151) victim in Yunior’s life. Behind the mask, a facsimile of a face, lies nothing. Yunior’s path is clear, although it takes him another five years to begin. He must put a face on Oscar by turning the blank book into text.

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## Mahler, Anne Garland. The Writer as Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. J*ournal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia [Volume 19](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/loi/cjla20?open=19#vol_19), [Issue 2](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/toc/cjla20/19/2), 2010

**The faceless villain**

**The colonialist curse of the *fukú* is physically embodied in the novel by a faceless man who haunts the members of Oscar's family**. For example, immediately before Oscar's grandfather, Abelard, is imprisoned by the Trujillo regime for his insulting comment against the dictator, and the *fukú* is officially unleashed upon the family, Abelard's wife dreams that a faceless man stands over her husband's bed. The next night, she dreams he is standing over her children (237). Throughout the novel, the man without a face appears in moments of extreme violence when the family members experience the *fukú* in all its power. When Beli, Abelard's daughter and Oscar's mother, recalls how her foster father, with whom she lived after her parents died, intentionally burned her as a child, she claims that his ‘face had turned blank at the moment he picked up the skillet’ (261). Additionally, when Trujillo's secret police kidnap Beli as a teenager and beat her nearly to death, she sees that one of the policemen has no face (141). Oscar has an analogous vision when, years later, he too is being beaten: although his real assailants are two in number, he sees a third man with no face (299). These beatings, alongside many of the appearances of the faceless man, occur in the sugarcane fields in the countryside of the Dominican Republic, suggesting the faceless man's association with the hundreds of years of sugarcane slavery in Dominican history. **Most often, however, the ‘Faceless One’ (161) appears in the characters' dreams, seeming to represent something repressed that surfaces in the unconscious.** This ‘Man Without a Face’ (321) recalls the character of Rorschach from the 1980s DC Comics series *Watchmen* (1987).[3](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#EN0003) Although Yunior only mentions Rorschach once in the novel, he identifies *Watchmen* as being among Oscar's top three most beloved books as well as ‘[o]ne of the few things that he took with him’ (2007: 331) in the final days of his life, thus signaling the comic series as an integral inter-text of the novel.[4](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#EN0004) Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, the creators of *Watchmen*, portray Rorschach, who wears a faceless mask resembling the eponymous inkblot tests, as a radically right-wing superhero and champion of economic neoliberalism and social conservatism (Cooke [2000](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#CIT0004)).[5](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#EN0005) **Rorschach is a vigilante hero, like Batman, determined to fight evil despite the illegality of his actions. Unlike Batman, however, Rorschach records his thoughts in a diary, allowing the reader into his mind and showing how dark and violent this supposed hero truly is.** In a 2007 interview with the BBC, [Moore](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#CIT0032), the writer of the series, explains that he created the fascist character of Rorschach in order to exemplify the maniacal nature of the archetypical vigilante superhero, a characterological creation consistent with his overall objective in writing *Watchmen*. According to [Iain Thomson](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#CIT0042) in his article, ‘Deconstructing the Hero,’ Moore's postmodernist comic book series ‘develops its heroes precisely in order to ask us if we would not in fact be better off without heroes’ (2005: 109). Essentially, Moore aims to de-mask the superhero, undermining his traditionally romanticized persona by exposing him as a morally ambiguous figure.[6](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#EN0006)

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**In other words, although Díaz initially creates a clear delineation between the faceless tyrannical villain and the superhero writer, using the blank page versus ink on the page to indicate these two contrasting forces, he will ultimately merge these two extremes back together in the space of writing.** Writing, in Díaz's novel, indicates a space of **liminality** in which the **heroic and the tyrannical co-exist as two sides of the same coin**. As Díaz recognizes the similarity between writers and dictators, the manipulation of ink is what these seemingly opposed forces share. On the one hand, inklessness signifies the repressive silencing by the colonial dictator-villain (*fukú*); on the other, the placement of ink represents the attempt of the anticolonial writer-hero to counter that repression by revealing the words – and face – of that which has been repressed (*zafa*). However, the absence and presence of ink both constitute a form of writing, and ink as an instrument links colonial and anticolonial forces inextricably together: they share the same tools of expression and are therefore merged in the same symbolic field.

When Yunior describes his recurring dream in which Oscar waves a blank book, he adds, ‘Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming’ (Díaz [2007](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#CIT0012): 325). By linking Oscar, the hero of the novel, with the terrifying image of the *fukú*, **Díaz reveals the blurred line between the hero-writer and the forces of tyrannical power. This ambiguity is further revealed when Oscar has a vision of the Mongoose, who saved Beli and Oscar from the canefields and who is a symbol of resistance against the oppression of slavery, on the same bus as the faceless man**. On the way to the canefields where Oscar will meet his death, Oscar ‘imagined he saw his whole family getting on a guagua […] and who is driving the bus but the Mongoose, and who is the cobrador but the Man Without a Face’ (320–1). **Oscar's fantasy echoes the assertion that ‘[t]he only way out is in’ (209) in that you must go through the *fukú*, or pay the *cobrador* (conductor), in order to get to the *zafa*, or the Mongoose.** **However, by placing the Mongoose, a symbol of salvation from the *fukú*, on the bus with the *fukú* itself, Díaz posits the same unresolved tension between good and evil, hero and villain, as is revealed to Yunior by his vision of Oscar without a face.**

In this regard, if one conceives of the bus as the space of writing, the writer must pay the *cobrador*, must use colonial language and thus inhabit the space of the *fukú*, in order to move towards *zafa*. Both the oppressive force of colonial language and the contestatory voice of resistance exist in the same space of writing; they are on the same bus. Yunior, our super-heroic contestatory writer, confesses, ‘Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco’ (149). Thus, even the writer who attempts to fill in the blanks reproduces the tyrant's power to silence, leaving his own blank pages to be filled in by others. In this way, Díaz creates a novel within the superhero genre that, much like Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, is conscious of its own intimate cohabitation with – and reproduction of – the very power it seeks to dethrone.[13](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#EN0013) Díaz gives his critique of hierarchical power a sharp double edge by exposing the forces of domination present within his own writing, applying his criticism even to himself and thus exposing the limits of his own anti-colonial project, which threatens to slide back into the mold of the colonial tyranny that it seeks to unseat.

Díaz attempts to move beyond these inherent contradictions, in which colonial and anticolonial writing inevitably become homologous, by arguing for a practical use-value of contestatory writing: ‘the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the *fukú*’ – thus seeming to acknowledge that the implications of his own logic are that one cannot – ‘but whether or not one can even see it' (Danticat [2007](http://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13569325.2010.494928#CIT0006): 90). Thus, the role of the superhero-writer is not necessarily to defeat the *fukú* but to bring to light that which has been hidden, even within himself. In other words, *zafa* represents the power of writing to show the presence of hegemonic power, and thus the presence of the *fukú*, within writing itself