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Literary Bloodlines: The Family and the Construction of History in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, and Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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I. Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982), and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) are all novels of migrancy, written by male cosmopolitan authors, that focus on tracing the origins of historically oppressed locations and groups through the recovery and construction of family narratives. Although these three authors highlight very different geographical locations and historical narratives and incorporate their migrant position into their works in varying degrees, all three contend with the nature of historical origins: specifically, how such origins are constructed from fragmented physical and metaphorical elements, and thus rely on subjective and objective realities through which histories and identities are produced and represented. While all three of these authors are migrant figures—Rushdie and Díaz both live in the United States, and Ondaatje resides in Canada—the experiences of migrancy and diaspora are not thematized explicitly in *Midnight's Children* as they are in the other two works. Through the nexus of the family, each author presents the fractured and constructed nature of history, depicting how fragments and "pieces"—of information, of histories, of bodies—function as significant sources of production and representation and emphasize the vital connection between private experiences and national narratives. Each narrator's exploration of a family history demonstrates the problematic nature of historical creation as a construction of both literal and metaphoric elements and subjective and objective truths, and each author utilizes distinct forms of knowledge and representation to negotiate these binaries and to thereby recognize and narrate these fractured histories of oppressed groups. To facilitate this negotiation, each of these three authors attempts to create a type of "third space," where historical meaning and substance can be produced outside of the dichotomy of literal "reality"

and the "unreality" of metaphor. In these three works, the development of this space involves the creation of new fluids and modes of historical transmission and production that are integrated with or replace organic bloodlines and lineages—the snot of Saleem's grotesque nose, the multiple forms of media and genre used by Ondaatje, and the blood shed in acts of phallic violence in Díaz's novel, all function in this manner.

Rushie and Díaz both focus this mediation on narrative conceits within their novels, while Ondaatje negotiates his own fractured history through the use of mixed genre and different modes of media. For both Rushdie and Díaz, these conceits are largely related to the body and the ways in which history is written on or through the body and bodily fragments. Rushdie uses Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, as a physical representation of the Indian nation that is created after the end of British colonial rule, constructing Saleem's body and the bodies of his family members as sites for the concrete realization of metaphorical elements of the state. Saleem's self-selected lineage and his family history are founded on the body—specifically on certain pieces and fragments of the body, such as the nose, which are presented as the physical representation of family relationships and genealogy. Saleem uses his gargantuan nose to assert Adam Aziz, his chosen grandfather, as the origin point of Saleem's family narrative and of his nose's profound ability to sense and impact history. Due to Saleem's own sexual impotence, and thus inability to assert his identity or reproduce through sexual means, he produces a family and national history through the bodily fluid of mucus and through the act of writing. In many ways, Saleem's impotence and the gradual cracking and disintegration of his body represent the construction of a lineage and history that is potentially so fragmented as to be physically and metaphorically unsustainable.

Díaz, like Rushdie, uses the body as the location where discourses of ethnicity, sexuality and history are negotiated—but the bodies of Oscar and his family members reflect a history based on masculine power, drawn from Dominican structures of politics and hyper-masculinity in which power is expressed through phallic violence. Under the reign and example of Trujillo, the former brutal dictator of the Dominican Republic, the expression of phallic power through violence has become the cultural model for asserting an identity as a true Dominican male—a model to which Oscar can never conform. In the official account of Dominican history, dictated by Trujillo, instances of violence and dissenting voices are eliminated from the record, producing a history filled with gaps and "enforced silence[s]" (Hanna 505). Yunior's narration of the lives of Oscar and his relatives attempts to maneuver these silences to produce an alternate history in which the legacy of phallic power and violence is finally represented, and in which individual, subjective voices can finally be heard. Yunior's diasporic position as a Dominican male living in New Jersey, but who frequently returns to the Dominican Republic and thus remains affected by the legacy of brutality, gives him the unique ability to peer behind the curtain of silence enforced by Trujillo while still having access to physical spaces and individual histories rooted in the Dominican Republic. In his narrative, Yunior depicts the ways in which such violence physically is enacted and eternalized on the body and is psychologically internalized and negotiated on an individual level: Belicia, Oscar's mother, for example, is physically scarred by violence but also silences and erases her own painful memories of brutality, leaving her as an individual whose identity is as filled with gaps as the narrative of Dominican history. While the history Rushdie depicts is produced through the nonsexual bodily fluid of mucus, Díaz's narrative demonstrates how Dominican history is constructed through blood—both the blood of biological family

relationships and the blood shed through violence, which connects the Cabral-de-León family to a larger Dominican history of phallic power and brutality despite their position as diasporic subjects living the United States.

Ondaatje, like Rushdie and Díaz, is concerned with a project of family recovery—of recovering a history from fractured evidence and representations, and also with collapsing the binary of subjective and factual, objective truths. Ondaatje, however, negotiates these elements through the incorporation of different modes of media and genre, such as photography and poetry. While Ondaatje still uncovers and assembles his family history through pieces and fragments of "evidence," he uses different genres and media to negotiate the challenges and limitations of his historical project. As a "prodigal foreigner" returning to his former home of Sri Lanka, Ondaatje also uses these representative and generic modes to try to access a Sri Lankan identity and history from which he is estranged, even as the representations themselves demonstrate the potential impossibility of such access (Ray 39). The photographic "evidence" of Ondaatje's family, which he desires to use as "proof" of his legitimate connection to a Sri Lankan homeland, only further demonstrates how Ondaatje's upper-class family, aligned with the Dutch colonizers who oppressed the majority of the Sri Lankan population, is already estranged from the traditional, "authentic" positions he wishes to inhabit. Through the poetry contained at the center of the novel, Ondaatje thus attempts to access these subjects and locations through the subjective structure of verse, employing a metaphorical mode to access what he wishes to claim as a factual origin. While the other two works focus critically on political and social structures within the nation and their negotiation through family, Ondaatje's text deals largely with the narrator's project of constructing a familial history from different media and generic fragments, through which he hopes to

resolve his position as a prodigal foreigner and access the homeland from which he is estranged.

Assessed together, these three novels all traduce the romantic and organic notions of the family, demonstrating instead that family history and an individual's identification with the family is self-constructed from factual and metaphorical elements. While the family is generally construed as a unit within the state that organically produces and reproduces individuals and history, connected literally through blood, these works depict families as producers of metaphorical and literal meaning through alternative fluids and methods: Saleem's nose, the physical marker of his self-selected genealogy, produces the mucus fluid that enables him to contain and negotiate the numerous voices of the Midnight Children and to influence the subjectivities of individuals and the course of Indian history; for Ondaatje, the idea of an organic bloodline is replaced by a family history constructed and represented through different genres and media forms; Díaz depicts how the "blood" shed due to abuses of phallic power produces a family narrative based on the cyclical and possibly inescapable nature of such horrific violence. By using the family as the site where literal and metaphoric "fluids" and mediums are produced, negotiated, and transmitted, these three works demonstrate that both family and national structures are constructed from subjective and objective fragmented "evidence"—these texts dispel the idea that the nation, and thus the individual's connection to a national homeland, is organic and biologically founded. Without a completely objective, literal basis, both the family and the nation are revealed to be constructed myths, based on the interplay between literal and metaphoric "bloodlines." While these three novels assert constructed histories as valuable sources of meaning, the three works together present a historical narrative that exposes the potential instability and inaccessibility

of the constructed nation-state. Rushdie's depiction of Saleem's unseen "cracking" suggests that the fragments of the supposedly unified Indian nation and history will ultimately be exposed and become disjointed, leading to the destruction of individual and country; Ondaatje's text ultimately asserts the impossibility of using fragmented modes of representation to access and claim connection to the homeland. Oscar's brutal murder at the end of Díaz's novel, and Yunior's assertion that the next generation will still feel the effects of the fukú curse, suggest that the cycle of phallic violence will continue to be reproduced—in this case, returning to the homeland is not a haven for the diasporic individual, but rather puts one in danger of becoming a casualty of the nation's violent history.

II. Midnight's Children

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie negotiates the binaries of literal and metaphorical realities and public and private histories by constructing a narrator, Saleem Sinai, who, as the child born at the exact moment of India's creation, serves as the primary location for the physical manifestation and negotiation of the factual and abstract concepts related to the birth and development of the Indian nation after the end of British colonial rule. While Saleem functions as the primary embodiment of the Indian nation, his family is also presented as a site through which the metaphorical concerns and divisions of the nation are physically represented and transmitted among different individuals, demonstrating the power of the abstract world to influence physical bodies and events. Even as Rushdie uses Saleem and his family as literal representations of the Indian state, he resists the idea of an individual or national "essence" and singular identity by defining Saleem's body and genealogy—and thereby embodying Indian history and nationhood—through pieces and fragments, revealing

the fabricated, mythical nature of a singular, unified India. Rushdie establishes physical fragments as productive sites of meaning and history: Saleem's nose, for example, is used to establish a physical basis for his own self-selected, non-biologic genealogy. The nose functions as a physical connection between Saleem and the family, and also connects the entire lineage to larger metaphorical historical trends. Since Saleem is depicted as impotent, and thus cannot regenerate through physical, sexual methods, the mucus contained in and created by his mythic nose becomes a historical "fluid" that produces meaning: this fluid becomes the physical manifestation of a "bloodline," and thereby provides a metaphorical basis and reality for Saleem and India's historical narratives. As Saleem claims and cements metaphorical lineage through the nose, Rushdie also displays how many of the relationships in this genealogy are constructed from fragments, resulting in bonds in which individuals try to connect with the metaphorical, mythical idea of a whole, unified entity by accessing and knowing pieces of the subject. This reflects the idea that the Indian nation, like the individual and the family, is a metaphorical entity that is in fact made up of distinct, fractured pieces, and is thus as fragmented and potentially volatile as Saleem's family and Saleem himself. Saleem's gradual, unseen "cracking" suggests that such a myth, while a productive source of meaning and history, may ultimately be unsustainable (Rushdie 70). While Rushdie's status as an Indian migrant living in "exile" in the West is not overtly explored in this novel, as it is in *The Satanic Verses* and Díaz and Ondaatje's works—and in fact the narrator is unified with, rather than estranged from, the homeland—anxieties about the accessibility and representation of the nation, which are seen with Díaz and Ondaatje's narrators, are still evident in the process of Saleem's disintegration.

Rushdie's negotiation of metaphorical and literal entities through embodiment is foregrounded by his stylistic incorporation of linguistic metaphors that connect abstract elements with powerful physical forms, while simultaneously highlighting the constructed nature of metaphor itself. Neil Kortenaar notes that Saleem often alerts the reader of the literal unreality of the very metaphors that he employs, self-consciously bringing attention to a metaphor's ability to equate and thus identify two subjects—such as when Saleem, for example, describes how Jamilia discarded him in the "metaphorical waste-basket of army life" (Kortenaar, *Self* 49; Rushdie 444). Many of the metaphors Saleem creates in his narrative also follow a specific construction that equates an abstraction to an aspect of the physical world. He frequently relates these two levels of reality using the preposition *of*: Saleem, for example, refers to "the amniotic fluid of the past" (Rushdie 120), his mother's "web of worries" (110), and his "shawl of genius" (178). Saleem also employs many metaphors that equate abstractions with parts of the body: the "sudden fist of anger" (Rushdie 170), for example, as well as the "icy fingers of rage and powerlessness" (154), and "the mouth of a long, snaking decline" (Rushdie 201; Kortenaar, *Self* 49). These linguistic metaphors evoke the significance of both the abstract entity and the physical or bodily object simultaneously, representing a stylistic collapse of the binary between metaphoric and literal elements. Rushdie's use of linguistic metaphor to deconstruct this binary—especially Saleem's metaphors that equates internal, intangible concepts with parts of the body—provides a stylistic foundation for the larger project of embodiment, which is the most significant narrative conceit Rushdie employs to negotiate these levels of reality.

While Saleem himself provides the most clear physical embodiment of abstract concepts, Rushdie presents a broader negotiation of the binary between the literal and the

metaphoric through Saleem's family, in which inner sensations are constantly manifested in and transferred by physical entities. Within the family, these abstract feelings are physically manifested and incorporated into clothing, bodily features, and food, and they thus gain the power to directly affect others and the surrounding world. The hole in Aziz's chest, for example, is a physical manifestation of his estrangement from God and of the "wound that never heals" that is prominent within discourses of Indian nationhood—the bruise remains as a permanent, physical representation of the trauma and violence of the path to independence and the development of the Indian nation (Kortenaar, "Midnight's Children" 43). Aunt Alia fills the food and clothes she makes, for example, with her feelings of bitterness and hatred towards her sister, giving Saleem and the Brass Monkey "the bitter mittens and soured pom-pom hats of her envy," which in turn fill them with a new sense of bitterness and cynicism (Rushdie 351). Alia's emotions also become physical markers on her body, as her skin becomes covered with "the thick dark hairs of her resentment" and her "heavy-footed corpulence of undimmed jealousy" (Rushdie 351). Mary Pereira stirs the "guilt of her heart" and her "fear of discovery" into her delicious pickles, which are then consumed and internalized by those who eat them (Rushdie 158). These embodied emotions can greatly effect the course of individuals' lives and the development of the family: when Amina starts eating Mary and the Reverend Mother's emotion-filled food, for example, she begins "to feel the emotions of other people seeping into her," which motivates her to start gambling at the horse races to make money, although she feels "consumed by sin" due to "Reverend Mother's curries filled with ancient prejudices" (Rushdie 158-59). By using embodied metaphors to explore the connections between abstract senses and the physical world, Rushdie creates a narrative where physical bodies and structures can legitimately and valuably function as

microcosms of large metaphoric concepts, such as nationhood. The fantastic thus becomes a way for Rushdie to facilitate "the transition from mind to matter" and assert the "realness" of metaphor—a concept that Rushdie explores more extensively through Saleem's position as a bodily site for the manifestation of the metaphorical and the abstract (Todorov 50).

As Saleem linguistically utilizes metaphors in his narrative to draw connections and equivalencies between metaphorical and physical elements, his own body serves as the primary site for the physical construction and materialization of metaphorical concepts related to the birth and development of the Indian nation. Saleem frequently indicates that his body is the site for this interplay between metaphoric and literal at both an individual and national level, displaying his self-conscious awareness of his own existence as an embodied metaphor. In "The Kolynos Kid," for example, Saleem reflects on his unique connection with the nation, stating that he is linked to history and the fate of the nation "both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively" (Rushdie 272). He is entwined with the origin of the Indian nation—reflected through his midnight birth—as well as with its development, affecting history through his actions while also being changed, often physically, by national events. This embodiment, while seemingly encouraging the reader to connect the singular individual that is Saleem and the unified Indian nation, actually resists the idea of an individual or national "essence" at an abstract or physical level. Rather than portraying Saleem's body as a singular "vessel" that is "indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will," and thus portraying Saleem as the embodiment of a perfectly unified nation, Rushdie defines Saleem's body and genealogy through pieces and fragments (270)—an embodiment that thereby reveals Indian history as fragmented and discontinuous and displaying the mythical, fabricated nature of the idea of a singular, unified India.

Saleem's nose is the most important bodily fragment in the narrative, serving as a physical representation of Saleem's connection to a self-constructed genealogy and metaphorical family origin. Through the nose, Saleem grounds his own mythical existence in the figure of Aadam Aziz: Aziz's own notable nose is presented as the origin of Saleem's own physical monstrosity—the "colossal apparatus" which he describes as "[his] birthright" (Rushdie 8). While it is later revealed that Aziz is not Saleem's biological grandfather, the nose serves as a physical manifestation of the metaphorical bloodline Saleem constructs—the nose asserts the legitimacy of Saleem's claimed relationship to Aziz, and provides a physical point from which Saleem can reject his biological heritage from Methwold, the British colonizer. Even after Saleem is found to be the child of Methwold, and thus biologically linked to British colonial structures, he refuses to be reclassified by Padma as "Anglo-Indian" or derive a new racial identity—insisting that his nose continues to define him as "Snotnose, Stainface, [and] Sniffer," rather than as "an Anglo" (Rushdie 131). By continuing to derive the history of his nose from Aziz rather than the colonizer Methwold, he resists an imposed definition of "Anglo-Indian" identity and continues to locate and derive meaning from self-selected origins physically embodied through the grotesque nose (Hawes 154).

As the nose is cemented as the physically origin-point of Saleem's self-selected, metaphorical lineage, it also serves as a foundation for Saleem and his family's heightened connection between their physical bodies and abstract elements: like Saleem's protuberance, which has the power to penetrate the subjectivity's of others and enact events of historical importance, Aziz's nose is able to sniff "the whiffs of change," thus asserting this lineage as one in which metaphorical concepts can be detected and physically manifested through a specific bodily fragment (Rushdie 6). The fragment of the nose thus provides both a physical

grounding of Saleem's non-biologic lineage and also creates a foundation for the physical embodiment of metaphorical concepts that is central to Saleem and his family's history.

In these ways, the nose becomes a physical site for the sensing and transmission of histories, and establishes Saleem and his non-organic lineage as a microcosm in which these histories produced by the nose will be negotiated. Saleem's connection to his family history is constructed non-biologically—not only is Saleem not the biological son of the parents he has always known, but he himself is sexually impotent, meaning that he can never reproduce and continue this genealogy through organic means. The creation of an organic bloodline with a basis in blood as a biological fluid is impossible for Saleem in terms of both his ancestry and his future reproduction, and is thus replaced by a metaphorical process of self-selected ancestry and historical reproduction based on the fluids of the nose (i.e. mucus, or "snot," as Saleem and other characters, such as the boatman Tai, refer to it) (Rushdie 8). The fluid of the nose, in addition to serving as a new type of organic bloodline, is also established in the family as a fluid through which historical trends are realized and transmitted; this mucus becomes a "bloodline" connecting the members of this lineage and also cementing their unique relationship to larger aspects of Indian history. With Saleem, for example, it is evident that the snot in his nose—while always causing him physical discomfort—enables him to invade the subjectivities of those around him, and to communicate and mentally convene with the other Midnight Children. Once Saleem's sinuses are drained, this fluid connection is broken, for while he becomes able to smell the emotions of others, he can no longer communicate telepathically with his peers to try to impact history. Saleem, now unable to impact history through sexual fluids or snot, takes up the pen as a new type of phallic instrument in the process of historical production—just as the nose became a physical

replacement for the reproductive power of sexual fluids, the pen is a replacement for the metaphorically powerful nose-fluids that were extracted from Saleem. Through Saleem, the history of India is thus depicted as a production based not on biological origins and reproduction, but constructed through metaphorical means and "fluids" that are just as meaningful and "real" as physical origins.

In addition to constructing the nose as Saleem's physical source of metaphorical ancestry, which demonstrates how origins are founded on fractured pieces rather than on a unified "essence," Rushdie focus on isolated body parts explores how both familial and national realities are built from a compilation of fragments—exposing how societally accepted and often desired concepts of national and historical unity are myths built of a collection of chosen pieces. The focus on bodily fragments, such as the nose, and their metaphorical importance is reflected by the idea of constructing fantasies based on pieces that reoccurs throughout Saleem's family narrative. The love story between Aadam Aziz and Naseem Ghani is the first such example of this: as he treats her various ailments, examining one section of her body at a time through the mutilated sheet, he develops a fragmented picture of her in his mind, a "badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts" (Rushdie 22). He falls in love with a woman who he has only seen in physical parts—a woman who is constructed and "glued together by his imagination" (Rushdie 22). Similarly, when Mumtaz marries Ahmed Sinai and becomes Amina Sinai, she can only learn to love her new husband in parts, each day picking one fragment and concentrating on it until she feels affection (Rushdie 73). Through this loving in parts, Amina Sinai causes Ahmed to start to physically transform into her former husband, Nadir Khan, losing his hair and developing a large, pudgy stomach. In both of these narratives, the origin of love is not a deep, stable attachment to an

unchanging person but rather originates from an imagined fantasy based on fragments—the mind constructs and loves a metaphorical "person" built from individual parts.

Since many of the figures and relationships in Saleem's family function as microcosmic representations of larger abstract concepts as well as intangible social and political trends specific to the new Indian nation, the fragmented nature of this family structure suggests that the state itself is also a mythical entity constructed from pieces. Aziz's marriage to the Reverend Mother, who is vehemently opposed to modernization, can be interpreted as a literal staging of a hybrid union between traditional India and the modern, and functions as a physical act that embodies the abstract idea of nostalgia for the traditional felt even during times of intense nationalism (Kortenaar, *Self* 27). The extreme bitterness and tension that exist within this relationship, as well as the dissatisfaction that persists for much of Amina and Ahmed's marriage, illustrates the potential dangers of forming an emotional attachment to such a constructed "whole," which can only truly be known through fragments—Rushdie thereby explores the human desire to access a unified subject while demonstrating the impossibility of doing so.

Saleem's own invisible "cracking" is a further physical manifestation of the potential impossibility of creating and embodying a mythical "whole"—whether that desired whole is an individual, a family, or the Indian nation itself. Throughout the narrative, Saleem insists that his body is "cracking" and "falling apart," and remains adamant about his disintegration even after a doctor examines him and declares that the cracks are only a figment of his imagination (Rushdie 70). Saleem asserts that these growing cracks are still real despite their metaphorical nature, and can be seen as an extension of the plurality that constantly exists within Saleem, and thus the unstable plurality that exists within the Indian nation. Like the

love stories of Saleem's parents and grandparents, the idea of the Indian nation is a metaphorical "whole" that is made up of distinct parts, and is thus as fragmented and potentially volatile as Saleem's family and even Saleem himself. When Saleem is in contact with the Midnight Children, for example, his mind becomes entwined with hundreds of voices from various economic and family backgrounds and becomes the stage for the battle among these differences—differences that ultimately create tension among the children as they age and develop prejudices and anger over issues of class, religion, and race. The growing disagreements and oppositions among the Midnight Children, negotiated within the space of Saleem's mind, reflect the plurality of and the intensifying oppositions within the nation of India. Bringing these numerous voices into dialogue within a single embodied space does not bring harmony and unity but rather results in a further fracturing between groups and dispels the myth of the unified "whole." Saleem's gradual decomposition demonstrates the potential impossibility of the Indian national and political project to "fashion a nation from a diverse subcontinent" (Kane 96). The nation, which is often viewed as a formally defined concept, both physically and ideologically, is founded upon metaphor and fantasy; it is founded upon origins that are often retroactively selected by those in power, much as Saleem, looking back on the story of his life, self-selects a genealogy that begins with Aadam Aziz. Saleem's ultimate "cracking" suggests that the mythic "essence" and singularity of his body, and thus of the Indian nation, is not a fantasy that can be permanently held together as fractured voices, groups, and ideas become more powerful and threaten the physical and ideological foundations and structures of the nation.

III. Running in the Family

Unlike Rushdie and Díaz, who utilize central narrative conceits to negotiate the binary of literal and metaphorical elements, subjective and objective truths, and private and public histories, Ondaatje's mediation of his family history and own identity is done through the use of multiple forms of media and genre. Ondaatje's fragmented collection of "memories, research, poems, and photographs," which shifts through different generic distinctions and thus resists being read as a unified, cohesive text, demonstrates—like *Midnight's Children*—how all history, including family history and national identity, is subject to and produced through the processes of selection, interpretation, and fictionalization and is thus filled with the potential for malleable, multiple meanings (Kamboureli 80). While Rushdie and Díaz establish different types of historical "fluids" and "bloodlines" through which history is constructed and mediated, Ondaatje incorporates different media technologies and genres through which representations of history, identity, and genealogy are produced. The multi-media and generically shifting nature of Ondaatje's project stems from the narrator's search to reconstruct a family history, grounded in Sri Lanka, while negotiating the internal tensions he feels due to his estrangement from his Sri Lankan ancestry and homeland—the narrator Ondaatje defines himself as the "prodigal foreigner" who cannot fully access or reject his background, and suggests that the discovery of a "true" family narrative might be the only way to access a concrete origin and identity to thus resolve his paradoxical status (Ray 39). The modes of representation Ondaatje incorporates—specifically the photographs and poetry contained in the narrative—reflect the narrator's desire to access both physical and metaphorical "evidence" of his family history. Photographs seem to be a particularly relevant tool for Ondaatje because of their representational nature as both physical "proof" of a

specific, eternalized moment in history and their status as constructed, manipulated visual images. By incorporating photography, Ondaatje attempts to uncover physical "evidence" of a historical family origin—but the nature and construction of the photos themselves simultaneously demonstrate how photography destabilizes the possibility of extracting a true historical "essence." Instead of uncovering a "pure" history, Ondaatje is confronted with physical representations of his family's class-based ability to perform multiple identities, which also reflect their historical estrangement from Sri Lankan history: Ondaatje is descended not from "authentic" Sri Lankan individuals but rather upper-class subjects who inhabit and enact a certain mimetic relationship with the Dutch colonial structure. Family history, even when physically captured, thus becomes a further representation of Ondaatje's estrangement from the homeland, rather than a way to mediate the tensions of his distance. Since photography does necessarily provide the access to a certain authentic family and historical "origin" that Ondaatje seeks, he incorporates poetry as a generic method for linguistically and metaphorically inhabiting and claiming "authentic" subjectivities of Sri Lankan history and culture. In the four poems at the center of the novel, the narrator Ondaatje attempts to inhabit multiple subjectivities and sensory experiences that would link him to a certain "essence" of Sri Lankan geography and history. Since Ondaatje can only capture glimpses of such access, and can only do so through the constructed, imagined subjectivities of other individuals, Ondaatje—even is his attempt to access and articulate a connection to an origin—illustrates the multiple layers of representation and mediation that stand between him and the mythic homeland and history he wants to reach through his familial reconstruction.

Much of Ondaatje's use of multi-media and multiple genres is shaped by the narrator's desire to negotiate his migrant position, as a Sri Lankan living in Canada, through a return to

Sri Lanka and a recovery of family history. Unlike Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, who is firmly physically and geographically grounded in India and embodies the very Indian history he constructs, Ondaatje's narrator occupies the paradoxical position of the "prodigal foreigner" (Ray 39): even as he tried to return to the "home" of his birth, he remains separated from and foreign to this homeland since he has been geographically separated from it for so long, leaving him in a position where he is simultaneously the "foreigner" and the "prodigal who hates the foreigner" (Ondaatje 79). Within the term "prodigal foreigner," there is a tension produced by the intersection of metaphorical and literal elements of position and identity: in terms of physical and geographic reality, Ondaatje can claim origin from Sri Lanka as the location of his birth, but he is defined as a foreigner by his decision to physically distance himself from this homeland by moving to Canada; on a metaphorical level, Ondaatje occupies the role of the prodigal son by returning and constructing a family narrative, but he remains a foreigner because he cannot access certain subjective experiences and histories that he sees as belonging to a more authentic essence of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje's physical distance from both his family and Sri Lankan homeland is also often linked to terms of emotional estrangement, indicating his literal and abstract separation from his family and national histories: in Jennifer's account in the section "Final Days/Father Tongue," for example, she says that Ondaatje's father "longed for [him]" in his physical absence, and other sections of the narrative highlight how the emotional distance caused by Ondaatje's parents divorce was rendered physically when all of the children decided to leave the broken family and Sri Lanka (Ondaatje 194). Ondaatje's desire to return to Sri Lanka and recover his family history indicates suggests that the narrator sees the assembly of such a family narrative as a way to

negotiate and relieve the physical and abstract tensions of his position as a "prodigal foreigner" and discover a point of origin and identity.

Within the lyrical prose sections that compose the majority of the novel, the author Ondaatje presents this physical and metaphoric displacement through the use of metaphors that express the subjective experiences of the prodigal foreigner. The opening scene of the novel, for example, employs opposing metaphors to describe the Sri Lankan landscape, which reflect his unmediated anxieties: the vivid, lush vegetation is transformed in his mind into a barren parasite that feeds on the foreigner (Ray 39). This opposition of lushness and death parallels his own unresolvable prodigal/foreigner position that affects his imagining and experience of Sri Lanka. Ondaatje also consistently establishes opposing metaphors that contrast the coldness of Canada—his Western home—and the excessive heat and humidity of Sri Lanka: in the first scene, he contrasts the "brittle air" (21) and frozenness of Canada with the tropical sweat of Sri Lanka, and longs to be in Asia at the start of this "new winter" (22). Through such metaphors, Ondaatje constantly generates a "double layer of meaning" that depends on disparate geographical locations but also on his constructed imaginary view of these places (Ray 41). Ondaatje's narrative demonstrates that for the prodigal foreigner, the homeland—in this case Sri Lanka—is often imagined and conceived of, and felt most intensely, as an absence. While these tensions and oppositions can be linguistically expressed through metaphors in prose and can be contextualized within the fragmented family narrative Ondaatje constructs, they are not reconciled within this generic form—Ondaatje must turn to other genres and modes of media to further explore and negotiate these binaries within the larger structure of his family history.

Photography is one of the main media technologies Ondaatje incorporates to represent and negotiate his own problematic position, with photos functioning as both artifacts of specific historical subjects and contexts but also as a site for the production of malleable identities and histories. Photographs are used at the beginning of each main section of the text; none of the photos are titled or captioned insofar as the sections themselves are titled (Bowen 177). Only some of the photos are directly referenced in the narrative, while others are included without textual explanation or contextualization. Ondaatje uses photos as a certain type of "testimony," displaying them as "elegiac witness[es]" of the ancestry he is attempting to uncover and using them to construct his own relationship (as author and narrator) to representation and the real (Bowen 172).

As a medium, photographs seem of particular interest to Ondaatje because of their representational nature: photos are extremely dependent on the physical world they represent but are manifestly and often overtly constructed. Photos are thus both linked to literal, physical truth through the act of representation but are also a type of constructed, manipulated fiction. Whereas in *Midnight's Children* Rushdie constructs Saleem, the narrator as the individual that physically embodies the literal and metaphorical realities of India, Ondaatje employs photography as a mode that is also able to construct and make physical and permanent both the objective and abstract components of a subject, and to encompass and render these through a single representation. This idea is reinforced by Ondaatje's statement in the "Acknowledgements" section at the end of the narrative: "I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture.' And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (206). In this remark, a portrait or photo is linked to both truth and fiction, contributing to the

"fictional air" of the content but also producing meaning that, although constructed or metaphorical, is just as or perhaps even more valuable than the "facts" (Ondaatje 206).

To further assess the function of the photographs Ondaatje incorporates in his narrative, it is necessary to assess photography's historical development as a certain type of objective representative medium capable of producing "artifacts" that could convey individual identity, social and cultural discourses, and a specific physical space and temporal moment in a single image, and the role of such photographic portraits in European societies and colonized or previously colonized nations. As a medium, photography produces a physical representation of a specific moment that engages with and emerges from specific cultural and historical discourses. When introduced in Western Europe in the 19th century, photography became a mechanized way of producing visual images that reflected and cemented a growing societal and scientific value on objective perspective as the source of reality (Lalvani 14). This idea was linked to the concept of philosophical positivism that had also gained prominence in Europe during the early 19th century: positivism attempted to articulate a new consciousness of the real and emphasized the need to literalize and objectify the real to understand and represent it (Lalvani 17). Photography's importance as a source of objective representation was partially due to its ability to create a lasting image that was independent from the subject being captured—an aspect applauded in many early reviews of the daguerreotype, such as this 1839 report in *La Gazette de France*: "These images are no longer transient reflections, but their fixed and everlasting impress which, like a painting or engraving, *can be taken away from the presence of the objects* (Lalvani 18). Photographs are thus regarded as "everlasting" artifacts that can serve as effective, objective representations of subjects at a specific moment in time and space.

While this passage highlights the similarities between the representative power of photography and painting, photography became viewed as medium that produced more objective and thus "real" visual images than any other mode of representation. This is related to photography's power to capture the body in a specific moment in time and space, thereby positioning the subject in an eternalized temporal and physical reality. Photography also represents the body within a particular historical and cultural context, where different social discourses are operating on and reflected by the subject: "Photography operates in disciplinary discourses to arrest, isolate, and instantiate the body in relation to the axes of time and space; it enables the decipherment, delineation, and analysis of the body's surface" (Lalvani 34). Even as photos capture a specific moment, they are also highly constructed representations, with the image being produced by both photographer and subject: a photo is not simply an objective representation but a constructed image imbued with metaphoric and abstract elements. Photography thus enables the representation and objectification of elements of both physical and material reality and more abstract, intangible discourses that are enacted on and through the bodies of individuals. In this sense, a photographic portrait is historic evidence of a unique intersection of a subject with specific physical, temporal, and social and metaphorical conditions and discourses.

Photography's ability to represent both physical elements and abstract, largely intangible discourses (whether these discourses are being consciously or unconsciously reflected in the individual) became amplified, especially in the West, as its popularity and growing availability coincided with intellectual and bourgeois ideas of individuality and pseudosciences that declared a firm connection between a person's inner "essence" and their physical appearance and behavior. Physiognomy and phrenology were two such

pseudosciences that were linked to cultural conceptions of photography: physiognomy emphasized the face, especially the eyes, as the physical reflection of an individual's inner morality and spirit; phrenology focused more on "a correlation between behavioral traits and cranial shape" (Lalvani 48). In these discourses, the body is elevated to the "visibility of a text, its signs deciphered to disclose moral qualities residing therein" (Lalvani 48). A photograph of an individual thereby became a piece of visual evidence that reflected both the physical and inner reality of the person at a specific moment in time: with such discourses enacted through the subject as well as the viewer of the photograph, the metaphorical inner "essence" of a person was rendered as a literal, physical element of the body that could be objectively viewed.

One of the major social discourses that contributed to the development of certain types of photographic portraits and is clearly reflected in many photographic images was that of economic class and social status—photographs were a mode through which individuals could assert not only their own individuality but could "represent, and inscribe historically, their arrival into the domains of finance and culture" (Lalvani 44). The constructed nature of photography was an essential aspect of this process, and in this desire to display and visually capture a specific idea of class status, the photography studio became an increasingly performative space. The studio was a location where specific metonymic signs were constructed—certain poses, expressions, and material props—and these "props" enabled individuals to fabricate and promote a "public self of portraiture" (Lalvani 68). Thus even as photography became a mode to create a permanent artifact of individuality, photographic portraiture was simultaneously a way to construct and represent an individual's position within a social and class hierarchy.

While photographic portraiture engaged with these discourses of individuality, largely in the West, it was also employed in other countries colonized by imperial Western nations. In these locations, photograph operated within historical and social conditions to create "visual identities" that reflected similar social discourses to those that impacted the development of Western portraiture. Subjects of nations under colonial rule or previously under such imperial control also wanted to assert their individuality and class status within a social hierarchy dominated by those of European descent. Christopher Pinney describes how the rise of a new ethnic colonial elite, aligned politically and financially with the goals of the imperial regime, in countries such as India caused the rise of a new "visual culture" with a focus on individual, class-affirming portraiture: portraits became concerned with representing individual members of an "elite in which markers of ethnicity were downplayed" (97).

Even as portraits in many colonized countries, such as India, were used to represent and promote a "de-ethnicized elite," it still retained traces of other photographic methods that were connected to native, non-Western conceptions of embodiment (Pinney 97). Whereas many Western and colonial portraits sought to represent a unified and fixed body and "essence" of an individual, photographers in places such as India also utilized the theatricality of the studio to produce images with multiple layers and possibilities of representation. Pinney describes how in Indian photography, the image produced revealed a malleability of identity, rather than the subject's insertion into a certain social discourse or the cementing of an "essential" person. Pinney argues that in such portraits, which often involved collaboration between photographer and subject and capture an sense of "intimate theatricality," "photography does not seek to impose a category of identity plucked for a pre-existing

structure but emerges rather as a creative space in which new aspirant identities and personae can be conjured (85).

These numerous elements of photographic portraiture are inserted into Ondaatje's narrative through the different images he includes and the ways in which he contextualizes and mediates these visuals. The photo that opens the fourth section "Eclipse Plumage," for example, displays a certain performed public image of the Ondaatje family that situates them within certain Sri Lankan discourses of imperialism and social class. From the accounts in this section, one can conclude that this photo is a group shot of the fancy-dress, or costume party the Ondaatje family held in the 1920. All of the members of the family are in various costumes—one man seems to be wearing an American Uncle Sam costume, while another is wearing an outfit that evokes a railroad worker—and the group formally and ceremonially posed, with two young women lying in front of the rest of the family (Ondaatje 103).

Through this family portrait, the Ondaatjes are engaging with the discourse of the Sri Lankan social hierarchy, a structure that reflects the complex relationships between the Dutch colonizers and different native groups: in this portrait, the Ondaatjes perform and assert a public image of themselves as members of a Sri Lankan elite, who, while de-ethnitized in many senses and wealthy enough to engage with the behaviors and material possessions of the imperial rulers, still occupy and create this identity through the Sri Lankan landscape. By just assessing the photo in isolation, it is evident that this family is of a higher class, for they are wealthy enough to afford costumes—many of which relate to Western cultural images, which demonstrates that they have a certain level of global political and cultural awareness—and have the leisure time to host an event at which they can wear these costumes and have this celebration eternalized in a photograph. From the context of the novel, one can discern that

the photograph reflects the unique social status the Ondaatjes occupy in society: the family has historically been in favor with the Dutch colonizers, ever since an ancestor, who was a doctor, cured the Dutch governor's daughter of a terrible ailment, and are wealthy enough to send their children to European schools and to host elaborate dinner parties (Ondaatje 64). The photo portrait thus represents the family within the social and historical reality that they inhabit, in what could almost be seen as a mimicry of European bourgeois family portraiture.

This photo, however, also reflects photography's previously discussed potential for enabling the construction, performance, and representation of malleable or multiple identities, a facet of this medium that may be tied to its location in Sri Lanka, and which presents for Ondaatje the potential impossibility of identifying a "pure" source of origin for his family history and own identity, Although in many ways this family does construct a portrait reminiscent of bourgeois photos intended to assert the family's class and social status and cement identity in representation, the Ondaatjes use the photo to fabricate layers of potential identity and meaning. Since they are in costume, the Ondaatje's are not trying to present authentic, "essential" versions of themselves and their identities but are rather posing in costume, meaning that they are displaying their bodies through a chosen, fabricated identity. The photo visually represents the Ondaatje's, but simultaneously represents the bodies of the Ondaatje's as mediated through metonymic signs that align them with fictional, constructed identities. The photograph, capturing this moment in time, allows for the coexistence of both of these levels of reality—the Ondaatjes that are under the costume and the constructed visual identities of this costumed cast of characters—and thus evades being read in a purely objective manner. The portrait thus visually represents both literal and metaphorical levels of reality that are occurring at a specific moment in time, in a specific space. The family's

placement in the photo in front of jungle foliage evokes the idea that such multiplicity of identity is dependent on or emerging from their position geographic location. Ondaatje's family's class privilege in Sri Lanka, which is a result of their historical connection to Dutch colonizers and their wealth, enables them to "perform" multiple identities, thus preventing any interpretation of their photograph as an artifact of a greater "essence"—much as in Rushdie, Ondaatje demonstrates that embodied representations, here created through photos, are a lens through which fragments and pieces can be accessed but which cannot provide a "pure" and unified entity or point of origin.

The status of photographs as artifacts of a specific reality is further reflected in Ondaatje's incorporation of the photo of his mother and father after their engagement. Ondaatje states that this photo, which opens the penultimate section "What We Think of Married Life," (163) is the image one he has been searching and "waiting for all [his] life," for it is the only photograph he has found of his father and mother together (161). He takes the image as "proof" that his parents, despite their ultimately bitter separation, were "absolutely perfect for each other" as "hams of a superior sort" (Ondaatje 162). Ondaatje, in his journey to discover the father and family from which he is so physically and temporally distant, wants to view the photograph as did many in the 19th century: as a representation of an objective, essential truth about the subject, and as a mode of eternalizing the meaning of the single moment in which that reality existed. The context Ondaatje provides about the images demonstrates that while the physical reality of the photo preserves a specific moment independent of the subject(s), the subjects themselves and the conditions in which they live do change and alter the "reality" captured in the photographic image. The section following this image, for example, describes the "silence" that "surrounded [Ondaatje's] parents'

marriage"—even as the photo indicates how "perfect" they were for each other, the narrative undermines this vision by demonstrating how they were profoundly unalike and ultimately incompatible (Ondaatje 167). The placement of this permanent physical artifact of Ondaatje's parents love alongside a narrative that gradually uncovers the deep troubles that destroyed their marriage in fragments of gossip and memory seems to allow for Ondaatje and the reader to grasp a seemingly objective, stable history on the one hand while also undermining the very possibility of such a permanent, singular reality.

While these photos provide a physical representation of the historical existence and lived reality of Ondaatje's family, they still only give a lens into a fragmented upper-class Sri Lankan world that is estranged from the "authentic" Sri Lankan history and culture that Ondaatje wishes to access to reconcile his position as the prodigal foreigner. Ondaatje's desire to access and express the subjectivities of what he constructs as more "authentic" and historical Sri Lankan individuals stems from his own family's historical connections to the Dutch colonial system and thus their familial estrangement from many elements of Sri Lankan society and culture. Even as Ondaatje incorporates the photographs to insert a type of physical "evidence" into his narrative, he recognizes that these visual representations and their place in his family history only further estrange him from the Sri Lankan origins he hoped to uncover to reconcile his tensions as "prodigal foreigner." Ondaatje's ancestors were defined by their connections with the Dutch colonizes: the Dutch governor gave Ondaatje's ancestor a "new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language" (Ondaatje 64). By describing his family name, and thus his own genealogy, as a parody or mimicry of an element of the Dutch colonial system, Ondaatje depicts a family history that is estranged from the very Sri Lankan society and landscape they inhabit. The Ondaatje family,

who, at least in name, mimic elements of the oppressive imperial Dutch structures, and who occupy a social class in which they enjoy Western and privileged activitiesare distanced from the very Sri Lankan history in which Ondaatje wants to ground his historical exploration and process of identity formation. Even before Ondaatje further displaces himself through his migration to and "voluntary exile" in Canada, he is thus already displaced from the very homeland and cultural history he wishes to recover (Ray 46). Ondaatje's text thus destabilizes notion and very possibility of accessing a mythical homeland through the reconstruction of a family history: for the narrator, the very artifacts he uses to gain insight into his family and national origins only provide him with performed, fragmented representations of identity that are already distanced from any sense of national origin. Since family recovery is insufficient in negotiating Ondaatje's tensions, he must turn to another genre that may enable him to access and mediate moments and subjectivities more firmly rooted in Sri Lankan history and geography.

Ondaatje utilizes the genre of poetry to attempt to gain such access: the poetry reflects Ondaatje's attempt to engage with Sri Lankan social and ethnic figures, scenes, and subjectivities that are far removed from his own experience, but seem to be focused upon more authentic historical representations of Sri Lankan history. Whereas Ondaatje uses the photographic portraits to engage with historical figures from his own past who, as identifiable individuals, could be physically eternalized within a photograph, he employs poetry to explore the consciousness and lives of subjects who, to him, are more abstract, anonymous individuals who belong to more marginal social classes than Ondaatje's own family and thus engage with ideas of traditional and ancient, historic Sri Lankan culture and geography.

Poetry is the ideal genre for this exploration because the structure of lyric poetry itself allows Ondaatje to manipulate the "authorial attachment" to the "I" that is often particularly present and assumed in lyric poetry, and thereby gain access to a multiplicity of subjectivities from different geographic, ethnic, and gender positions—allowing him to access and inhabit multiple layers of subjectivity within a single poetic representation (Bolton 235). The structure of these poems enables Ondaatje to reuse images and lines to present multiple subjectivities within the same poem without cementing these glimpses in a specific, stable origin or history. This more fluid, unstable relationship between signifier and signifier enables Ondaatje to present drastic shifts in voice and chronology that are not possible in his prose reconstruction—much as his family members could perform malleable and plural identities in their photographs, poetry enables Ondaatje to create imagined glimpses of other subjectivities that he wishes to inhabit and use to reach a concrete point of Sri Lankan origin and history.

Unlike Ondaatje's portraits of his relatives, who live in a world of glamour and wealth that separates them from the general Sri Lankan population, the figures in the four central poems occupy more "authentic" rural spaces and are marked by their participation in traditional activities and connection to the Sri Lankan landscape. The speaker in "High Flowers," for example, immediately defined the female subject as " the woman my ancestors ignored," which indicates that she occupies a marginalized class position beneath that of wealthier Sri Lankans, such as the Ondaatje's (Ondaatje 87). The woman in this poem is also captured in the process of chopping "the yellow coconut/the colour of Anuradhapura stone" (Ondaatje 87): Anuradhapura is a sacred city in Ceylon, founded during the 4th century BC, described by the United Nations as "a permanent manifesto of the culture of Sri Lanka" ("Sacred City"). Within the poem, the figure of the husband is also linked to Sri Lankan

history by references to a fixed, traceable historical legacy: he is described as being freed by "skill and habit" as well as the "curved knife his father gave him," which implies his connection to a definable Sri Lankan genealogy that has participated in these cultural practices for generations (Ondaatje 88, 89). In this poem, the husband and wife are thus presented subjects fixed to the history of Sri Lanka through associations with traditional activities, decent from definable Sri Lankan genealogies, as well as connection to monuments of pre-colonial Sri Lankan culture and civilization.

These poems also display how the lyric "I" can shift rapidly among multiple subjectivities, enabling Ondaatje to construct a sensory experience and landscape that he then navigate through numerous imagined, subjective perspectives. In "Women Like You," for example, which is based on earlier references to the ancient graffiti poems at Sigiriya, Ondaatje indicates a shift in temporal and subjective perspective through the use of quotation marks and indentation: in the first half of the poem, the lines, "Seeing you/I want no other life," and "The golden skins have caught my mind" are set off from the rest of the poem through indentation and quotation marks, indicating that they are taken directly from the graffiti poems (Ondaatje 92, 93). Midway through the poem, Ondaatje repeats the line "Seeing you/I want no other life," with no quotation marks or indentation: without these very minor markers, the lines suddenly seem to emerge from the contemporary "I" of the speaker, which thus shifts the "focalization 1,500 from the fifth-century poet to the modern one" (Bolton 232). This dual focalization between modern speaker and ancient Sri Lankan poet continues throughout the rest of the poem. Ondaatje writes, "you long eyed woman/the golden/drunk swan breasts/lips/the long long eyes," which, due to its lack of marking through quotation marks or indentation on the page, appears to be the words of the modern speaker

(94). The discussion of these graffiti poems in the previous section, however, where Ondaatje states that the ancient poetic phrases "saw breasts as perfect swans; eyes [as] long and clear as horizons" alerts the reader that these lines are likely taken directly from the graffiti poems, although not identified as such (Bolton 233). By claiming the words of the graffiti poems as the language of the contemporary "I" of the speaker, Ondaatje indicates a desire to know and to inhabit the subjectivity and the language of these "authentic" Sri Lankan figures across temporal and geographic boundaries.

Even as the poetic form allows Ondaatje to use the poetic "I" to imagine, articulate, and potentially access multiple subjectivities across gender, class, and historic structures, the poems also emphasize his ultimate separation from these "glimpses"—suggesting that while he can imagine and mythicize this origin he seeks, he can never truly stabilize his own identity and family history within it. In "The Cinnamon Peeler," one can see Ondaatje's desire to be engulfed and "claimed" by an imagined sensory experience that would link him to the historic and geographic construction of the homeland. Just as the cinnamon peeler's wife wants to be left with a "trace" of her husband's physical possession and love, and thus in a way to have her own identity be defined in relation to his unlike the other women with whom he is intimate, Ondaatje may be expressing his search for intimate contact and identification with a homeland (96)—although while the cinnamon peeler's wife achieves such identification through the smell of cinnamon left on her skin, Ondaatje remains estranged and distanced from the origin with which he wants to connect.

IV. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz explores the life and family history of nerdy Dominican outcast Oscar Cabral-de-León, using the narrative (along with its extensive footnotes) to create an alternative history of the Dominican Republic by recovering formerly silenced and oppressed private histories. While this novel, like *Midnight's Children,* uses larger narrative conceits to negotiate the binary between literal and the metaphoric elements, and also overtly confronts the challenges of accessing identity and homeland from a migrant subject position like *Running in the Family,* it also confronts a colonial history and legacy distinct from those in Ondaatje and Rushdie's works: unlike these other two texts, which focus on locations formerly officially colonized by European nations, Díaz's exploration of the Dominican Republic evokes the consequences of American neo-imperialism. The United States occupied the country from 1916 to 1924, helped groom Rafael Trujillo, and initially supported his brutal rule, despite knowledge of his violent and corrupt tactics (Díaz 19). This novel thus addresses the insidious legacy of nationally produced violence—although the regime is backed and supported by imperialist actions, much of this damage is largely inflicted by Trujillo, a fellow Dominican, and perpetrated against other Dominicans. By focusing on Oscar's family within the greater context of Dominican history, Díaz considers the problematic question of who is allowed to construct and dictate history. Trujillo, as dictator, tries to reserve this power for himself, erecting monuments and crushing dissent to enable himself to singularly articulate and record Dominican history. Díaz's narrator Yunior challenges this official narrative, presenting instead an alternative history of the Dominican Republic that interrogates the silences and omissions of Trujillo's version by exploring the subjective accounts of Oscar and his family members. Within this alternative

narrative, Díaz utilizes a "pastiche" of fragmented elements of both Caribbean literary and historical traditions and references specific to modern American pop culture, which reflects Yunior and Oscar's position as diasporic subjects who shift physically and metaphorically between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic (Hanna 500). This fragmented narrative, while prioritizing private, subjective elements of history, also demonstrates how individual and family histories are inextricably linked to larger social and political structures, and thus uses families and individual bodies as the sites at which these histories are enacted and represented much as Rushdie does. The discourse of hyper-masculine power, for example, which is produced by the structures of Trujillo's regime, is expressed on the bodies of Oscar and his ancestors through acts of phallic violence used to oppress individuals who diverge from social, political, and sexual expectations. Yunior's narrative demonstrates how individuals negotiate violence by producing their own internal, individually enforced erasures and silences—a process that creates subjective and historical gaps that eternalize the legacy of such trauma, even as individuals and larger Dominican society attempts to negate these memories. From his focus on the family, Díaz creates recurring intersections between the biological blood of shared family relationships and the blood shed through acts of phallic violence—the reproduction and lineage of a family thus becomes intertwined with the cyclical explosions of violence, suggesting that this trauma may not be escapable.

Yunior's constructed history of Oscar Cabral-de-León and his family provides an alternative narrative to the "official" version of Dominican history that is referenced frequently throughout the novel, especially in the footnotes Díaz incorporates to provide a broader account of the history of the Dominican state. Much of the exploration of "official" history in the novel revolves around the figure of Rafael Trujillo, nicknamed "El Jefe" (the

chief), the former brutal dictator of the Dominican Republic (Díaz 2). The first of the book's numerous footnotes, which are frequently used to describe both the official and silenced voices of Dominican national history, introduces Trujillo:

> For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality (Díaz 2).

In this footnote, Díaz prefaces these historical "facts" with the assertion that such a history is likely not well known, and implies the assumption that such a mandatory history would necessarily center on discussion of Trujillo. Further on in this footnote, Díaz includes aspects of Trujillo's biography, such as his voracious sexual appetite, that are subjective and would not generally be considered historically relevant—this inclusion reflects the total control Trujillo had over the Dominican Republic, in which even such personal desires became the foundation and mechanism for political decisions.

This total control is also reflected by the ways in which Yunior directly identifies Trujillo with physical and metaphorical elements of the Dominican nation and the process of its very creation. In subsequent footnotes in the first chapter, Díaz describes how Trujillo was "famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself…[and] for expecting, no, *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo" (2). This description demonstrates that Trujillo wanted to and succeeded in controlling both the physical spaces of the country as well as the behavior of his subjects and the "imaginary of the island" in the form of national social expectations and the historical record (Hanna 503). This passage also points to Trujillo's desire for singular control over this malleable history and its expression—a control Trujillo first asserts by claiming that he is responsible for the very origin and creation of the modern Dominican Republic. Yunior

describes how Trujillo constructed the "official" version of Dominican history to include one of his "outstanding accomplishments"—the "forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state," a creation that, while enumerated in the official record, was in fact enacted through violence and the genocide of Haitians and other oppressed groups (Díaz 3). Díaz's clever use of the word "forge" in this context simultaneously suggests that the "modern state" is an entity constructed through the power of human subjectivity and politics and poses the possibility that this construction of nationhood and national history is illegitimate—that the Dominican nation is in some way a "forgery" (Hanna 503).

While the use of the word "forging" in reference to Trujillo's relationship to the Dominican nation suggests that the establishment of the modern Dominican Republic was an event of positive historic production, Yunior's narrative demonstrates how this act of supposed "creation" was facilitated through destructive violence. This violence leads to significant gaps and erasures in the historical narrative of the Dominican Republic and in the personal and family histories Yunior recovers: groups or individuals who opposed Trujillo or whom he disliked were often brutally killed and thus physically "erased" from existence; on a metaphorical level, the subjective experiences of these oppressed individuals and groups were omitted from the written history of the Dominican state, and were thus linguistically and historically "silenced" (Hanna 506). Many scholars, such as Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson, have noted that "the creation of a national identity often involves the strategic 'forgetting' of moments of violence that accompany national formation" (Hanna 503). In a dictatorship such as the Dominican Republic under Trujillo, these moments of forgetfulness and silence are enforced by the political regime: such enforced silences help maintain the status quo and eliminate possibilities for change by eliminating opposing voices and altering

the official and even individual memory of national and personal trauma. These forced erasures are manifested through the "páginas en blanco" (the blank pages) that are found in abundance in national and individual narratives of the Dominican Republic (Díaz 119). This demonstrates the extent of Trujillo's control over both the metaphorical and the physical space of the Dominican nation by silencing histories of violence and thus destroying any possibility for such trauma to be recorded and potentially negotiated—he develops a monopoly over the production and articulation of history itself.

Through Yunior's narration, Díaz attempts to destabilize this monopoly by creating an alternative narrative of the Dominican Republic that negotiates the physical and metaphorical silences and erasures within Dominican history. Díaz does this largely by constructing a narrative that enables the expression of multiple and diverse voices that were largely oppressed and silenced by the Trujillo regime and its legacy. Díaz partially creates this "multiplicity of narrative modes and genres" by incorporating and engaging with both Caribbean literary and historical traditions and structures and references specific to modern American pop culture—an engagement that also reflects Yunior and Oscar's own status as diasporic Dominican migrants (Hanna 500). By emphasizing the importance of exploring multiple genres, Díaz also incorporates numerous subjective narratives within a broader exploration of Dominican national history, thereby asserting the equal importance of and the intimate, inseparable connection between private matters and the political life of the Dominican nation.

The first epigraph of the novel reflects Yunior's emphasis on giving voice to oppressed, personal narratives through the use of multiple genres that reflect his migrant position. This quotation is from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comic *Fantastic Four*, which

serves as one of the larger narrative frames of the novel: "Of what import are brief, nameless lives…to **Galactus**??" On the level of genre, this epigraph establishes that the medium of comic books will inform and structure this historical narrative, thereby integrating American pop culture elements with Dominican history—an intersection that provides a structural mediation for Yunior and Oscar as migrants and also for the negotiation of Oscar's identity as a nerdy "outsider" who conforms to neither American nor Dominican ideals. This epigraph also introduces the idea of "nameless lives," who are unimportant and disposable in the eyes of a tyrannical leader: unlike Galactus and Trujillo, who silence these individuals, Díaz and Yunior make these exploration of these "nameless lives" and their connection to larger national structures the central concern of the text.

In his narrative, Yunior uses the family—specifically, the Cabral-de-Leóns—as the nexus for the recovery and articulation of voices and stories silenced or erased by violence, and demonstrates through this family how such violent trauma is enacted and represented through individual bodies and the physical and psychological damage they sustain. One of the most central elements of Dominican politics and society that Yunior presents through his exploration of Oscar and his ancestors in how conceptions of Dominican male sexuality provide the foundations and structures for oppressive political violence, especially towards individual who fail to meet or adhere to Dominican cultural and sexual ideals. In addition to serving as the apex of violent Dominican politics, Trujillo also reflects a certain hyper-masculinity that comes to shape social and culture perceptions of Dominican masculinity and Dominican identity itself. Diza Ramirez argues that Yunior describes Trujillo as a *tíguere*: a man whose "behavior and disposition place[s] [him] beyond the pale of respectability…and the law" and who exploits "women emotionally, sexually, or financially" (394). Trujillo's

"heteronormative masculinity" became one of the major components of his initial appeal and his long-term political power: Trujillo's political platform of "masculinity-as-power" filled what was seen by many Dominicans as a vacuum in their country's leadership and influence after the United States occupation from 1916 to 1924 (Ramirez 395). Through his hyper-masculine behavior, Trujillo overpowered and humiliated members of the traditional Dominican social and political elite who had never accepted him within their ranks. Trujillo, for example, frequently slept with or raped the wives and daughters of his competitors and mostly upper-class officials to assert and display his limitless power (Ramirez 395).

Through his model of "masculinity-as-power", enacted through violence, Trujillo produces a type of "phallic power" that enables him to control the physical bodies and subjectivities of Dominicans and thus produce a nation built on brutality, oppression, and destruction. Unlike Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, who is impotent and thus can only sense and produce history through the fluid of snot, Trujillo's "historic fluid" is created by the construction of a hyper-sexual identity and the destruction of bodies deemed sexually or politically deviant: the blood shed by acts of violence becomes the "bloodline" that binds families and greater Dominican society, and is the fluid through which structures of oppression are cyclically reproduced. The ideal of hyper-masculinity did not cease with Trujillo's death—many Dominicans have internalized this standard of masculinity and the "bloodline" of violence it carries and enforces, and so continue to assert this fluid as part of Dominican history and identity. Christian Krohn-Hansen's argument supports this idea: he states that "notions of masculinity among Dominicans have played, and continue to play, a central part in the everyday production of political legitimacy—inside and outside the political parties, and the state. Ideas about masculinity constitute a dominant discourse"

(Krohn-Hansen 108). Now that the physical ideals of hyper-masculinity have been internalized to this extent, becoming an inherent part of the identities of many Dominicans and the political and social structures in which they live, phallic power continues to be "produced, reproduced and modified by ordinary people in everyday life in the Dominican Republic" largely through "verbal categories mainly based on sexual orientation, and labels used by Dominican men for classifying and evaluating each other as men" (de Moya 70).

Much as Rushdie uses Saleem and his family members' physical bodies as sites for the materialization of metaphor and history, Díaz uses Oscar's body as the physical locus for the negotiation of the terms of Dominican masculinity and the desire to access a certain sense of "true" Dominican identity from the possession of phallic power. Oscar's body is a physical representation of his deviance from both Dominican and American standards of masculinity—in terms of physical appearance, sexual behavior, and extracurricular interests. Rather than fitting into the "verbal category" of the *tíguere*, Oscar is aligned with a more feminine, less physically and sexually powerful version of masculinity: Yunior says that Oscar does not look like his "pana [chummy], Pedro, the Dominican Superman, or like [his] boy Benny, who was a model," but is rather a "homely slob" (Díaz 296). The parallels drawn between Oscar's life and the comic *The Fantastic Four* also construct Oscar's physical body as an expression of his alignment with marginalized nerd culture: Hanna argues that Oscar's "obesity marks him as the equivalent to the most physically obvious 'freak' of the Fantastic Four: Thing" (515). This connection suggests that Oscar's physicality cannot be expressed within Dominican terms of masculinity and thus can only be represented by the language and characters of the comic book realm. Oscar's status as a virgin and his opinions about relationships and love, which are expressed as far less physically-driven than those of the other adolescent

Dominican-American males he encounters, further define his deviation from Dominican norms of masculinity, which emphasize sexual conquest over faithfulness or deep emotion—Oscar himself even adamantly tells Yunior that he "heard from a reliable source that no Dominican man has ever died a virgin" (Díaz 174). In this quotation, Oscar himself indicates that being a "real" Dominican man means adhering to certain sexual expectations—expectations Oscar cannot and does not meet due to his physical appearance and romantic ideals. By failing to meet physical and behavioral standards of Dominican masculinity, Oscar cannot inhabit any Dominican term of masculinity, and thus his very ability to identify as a Dominican—in his own eyes and the view of the Dominican community—is called into question (Ramirez 395).

In addition to reflecting the tensions arising from Dominican constructions of masculinity and phallic power, Oscar also embodies the destabilized position of a Dominican-American male who cannot belong to or claim origin from either Dominican or American history. White Americans and people of color all reject Oscar because of his obesity and nerdiness, leaving Oscar isolated from any cultural or ethnic community: "The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican" (Díaz 49). Oscar is thus positioned as a diasporic subject who is unable to belong to either the culture of his ancestry or the American society he immediately inhabits: due to his appearance and behavior, Oscar is not accepted by Dominicans still living in the D.R., by Americans in his birthplace of New Jersey, or even by other diasporic Dominican subjects who are also attempting to establish a new life and identity in America. Unable to access the culture of his ancestry and the American society in which he was born and resides and

ignored and ridiculed by many, Oscar could be deemed as the ultimate "nameless life" whose narrative must be articulated and negotiated within larger Dominican history.

While constructing Oscar as an individual who, due to his physical "otherness" and deviance from norms of masculinity, is unable to access phallic power structures that are seen as central to Dominican identity and history, Díaz depicts female bodies as the sites where phallic violence in inflicted and its horrible effects are expressed and potentially mediated. As stated previously, individuals who deviate from Dominican ideals of sexuality and behavior are often the targets of this phallic violence, which partially stems from a desire (as seen with Trujillo) to control and possess female bodies as a path to and assertion of political power. Belicia, Oscar's mother, is a girl whose body immediately positions her as a deviant, marginalized subject in the Dominican Republic—much like Oscar's body, Belicia's physique is also a marker of difference. Born to a light-skinned black nurse and a white doctor, Beli's dark black skin is seen as a "bad omen" to her family and community (Hanna 515). Once orphaned, Beli's dark skin makes her undesirable to her extended family, which prompts them to give her away, leading to her horrible abuse at the hands of her "adopted" parents. As an orphaned, dark-skinned woman, Beli is marginal and unvalued in Dominican society, and is thus marked as an "outsider, a rejected body, as her blackness is precisely what Trujillo was attempting to exclude from the nation" (Hanna 515).

As Beli ages, greater attention is paid to the incredible sexuality of her body, as she becomes as object of desire for men of all races and backgrounds—this sexuality, while making her body a source of appeal rather than cause for rejection, also places Beli in greater danger of being sexually exploited and punished for "unacceptable" sexual conduct within this hyper-masculine Dominican culture. Unlike Dominican men, who are encouraged to

engage in numerous sexual encounters within the structures of hyper-masculinity, Dominican women are expected to remain virgins until marriage and face severe consequences if they do not or cannot conform to these expectations, despite their own physical desires and the prevalence of forced sexual encounters (Ramirez 395). Belicia, for example, is dismissed from her prestigious secondary school after she has sex in a school closet with a handsome, wealthy white boy in her class; her transgressive relationship with the Gangster and her impregnation by him lead to her horrific, almost deadly beating in the cane fields. In both cases, the men involved manipulate Beli so that they can control and enjoy her body: Jack, her white classmate, convinces Beli to have sex with him by promising "that they would be married as soon as they'd both finished high school," a lie Beli believes "hook, line and sinker"; the Gangster fails to mention to Beli that he is married, nonetheless to a Trujillo, and that Beli is thus is in horrible danger (Díaz 101). Within this system of phallic violence that glorifies masculinity based on the exploitation and objectification of women, Beli cannot gain autonomy over her own body and sexuality without horrific consequences—in the Dominican Republic, her body becomes an object through which men express and negotiate their own desires for sex, power, and control, and Beli is forced to flee to the United States to escape the brutality these desires inflict upon her.

One of the central methods by which members of Oscar's family negotiate physical and psychological trauma is by internally silencing or "erasing" these events because they are too painful or threatening to be remembered or recorded. Yunior describes how Oscar's mother Belicia Cabral suffers from "amnesia" about her past: she is not fully aware of certain aspects of her family history, such as the brutal murders of her parents and siblings, which she was too young to remember, and also purposefully chooses to "forget" aspects of her history

that she does not wish to recount (Hanna 505). Beli, for example, never tells her family about her traumatic childhood, in which she was almost forced into slavery by her foster parents, or about her nearly fatal beating in the cane fields. Yunior connects this personal "amnesia" to the larger prevalence of such "forgetting" within the Dominican consciousness:

> It says a lot about Beli that for *forty years* she never leaked word one about that period of her life: not to her madre, not to her friends, not to her lovers, not to the Gangster, not to her husband. And certainly not to her beloved children…In fact, I believe that, barring a couple of key moments, Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilles. And from it forged herself anew (258-9).

Monica Hanna argues that such a self-determined act of forgetting and denial is a "seductive prospect" when memories of violence bring only further trauma and pain (506). Yunior identifies this urge to forget as a larger Caribbean trend by dubbing the region the "Untilles," labeling it as a place where events are forgotten, denied, and reimagined. This account indicates that the "enforced silence" of the Trujillo regime, where violence and brutality is erased from the official historical record, has become "an internalized principle in the lives of individuals" (Hanna 505). As structures of phallic power are internalized, the "bloodline" of Dominican violence produces new individuals who are permanently damaged by brutality and who must reconstruct their own subjectivities to survive—just as Trujillo "forges" a Dominican nation from acts of destruction which are then silenced, Beli, in the aftermath of her terrible trauma, "forges" a new selfhood that is founded on negation and erasure of her past. The "bloodline" created by phallic violence thus produces history by damaging individuals to the extent that they either are "erased" by death or must reproduce themselves through self-enforced silences—creating a cycle in which acts of phallic violence are repeatedly committed and then "erased" in both individual and national histories.

The internalization of the structures and cyclical nature of phallic Dominican violence within the Cabral-de-León is represented by their connection to the concept of fukú—a curse of destruction. Yunior describes *fukú americanus*, or "more colloquially, fukú," as "a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Díaz 1). As Saleem's body in *Midnight's Children* serves as a physical manifestation of the metaphorical, and the photographs Ondaatje incorporates represent both physical bodies and abstract discourses and identities, the concept of fukú is simultaneously metaphorically significant and physically real—Yunior states that fukú isn't just a "ghost story…with no power to scare" but is "real as shit," with the power to physically destroy people (Díaz 2). This curse is passed through families, sometimes lying dormant for years, but always reemerging to get "its man" (Díaz 5). Yunior explicitly links the concept of fukú with the phallic power structures created by Trujillo, stating that Trujillo was the "hypeman of sorts, a high priest" of fukú, and would summon a "fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond" on anyone who plotted against or opposed him (Díaz 3). Fukú thus becomes a mythical construction that represents the violent means that Trujillo uses to assert his phallic power—Trujillo's control and power over society is so great that it can only be encapsulated in mythical terms. The concept of fukú also represents the intersection of the "bloodline" of phallic violence and the biological bloodline of the family: phallic violence becomes reproduced through the organic lineage, bringing cyclical violence to members of multiple generations.

While fukú is a supernatural concept aligned with the abuses of Trujillo's official history, the realm of the supernatural also becomes a space in which the family can use different mythical elements to negotiate the physical and psychological traumas of violence and potentially stop the cycle of brutality. In the face of fukú, Yunior states that the family

must resort to supernatural measures to prevent the curse from impacting the next generation, and describes that the "simple word" *zafa* is the "only one surefire counterspell that [will] keep you and your family safe" from fukú (Díaz 7). In addition to using the word "zafa" to ward off fukú, Oscar's family members also employ other supernatural means to escape the curse: Oscar's family, for example, uses amulets that are believed the have the ability to temporarily ward off the curse. Describing his fear that Lola's daughter, Isis, will one day have to confront the violence of fukú, Yunior says that Isis wears "three azabaches" around her neck, tools of "powerful elder magic" that shield her from the curse (Díaz 329-30). In this way, the narrative suggests that specific supernatural means may be the only way to prevent the reproduction of phallic violence and fukú within the biological bloodline.

Belicia's experiences with supernatural elements also illustrate myth and fantasy as ways to negotiate trauma and to live and reproduce in spite of the cycle of violence. When Belicia, for example, is kidnapped by the SIM (Military Intelligence Service) and beaten and left for dead in the sugarcane fields for her relationship and pregnancy with the Gangster, a supernatural entity materializes and prevents her from dying:

> So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her…"*You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter"* (149).

Even in the face of near fatal violence, Beli's contact with the supernatural world enables her not only to survive but to escape from the Dominican Republic and to reproduce—to give birth to her children Oscar and Lola. While the beating tragically kills the baby Beli was carrying, conceived with the Gangster—yet another destruction carried out on a female body by phallic violence—her contact with the supernatural figure of the mongoose

pushes her to live because it promises that she will successfully reproduce in the future and continue on a lineage that has already been marked by violence. While the creation of oppressive structures in the novel is often facilitated through brutality, this scene presents a new type of creation: Beli's ability to "create" and produce children stems from her ability to overcome the potential destruction of violence (in this case, her death) through the avenue of the supernatural. Myth and supernatural elements thus enable the production of new individual histories and family generations through biological reproduction even in the face of phallic violence.

Even while acknowledging the supernatural as a tool to negotiate and potentially ward off fukú, Yunior emphasizes that the cycle of phallic violence is still in motion. Oscar's murder in the cane fields by the Capitán—punishment for Oscar's sexual and romantic relationship with Ybón—illustrates that the fukú that almost killed his mother Belicia has returned to finally get "its man" (Díaz 5). Although the rest of Oscar's family lives in the United States and are geographically distanced from the physical dangers of the Dominican Republic, they are still caught in the structures of phallic power and the supernatural threat of fukú—the Cabral-de-León lineage is still carrying and reproducing the "bloodline" of historical violence as it grows biologically. Even as Yunior's writing provides an alternative history to Trujillo's official narrative, thus creating a counter-discourse to the Dominican political structures that continue to produce public and private silences, he expresses the certainty that one day, the "Circle will fail," exposing the next generation (such as Lola's daughter) to the destructive power of fukú.

V. Conclusion

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, and Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* all interrogate the fragmented nature of historical construction through the nexus of the family, exploring how both metaphorical and literal elements contribute to the production of family and national histories and demonstrating the interplay between personal experience and state structures. When assessed together, these three works produce a type of historical narrative of migrancy and family recovery from different temporal positions, generations, and colonial frameworks. Whereas Rushdie and Ondaatje are often considered among the inaugural figures of postcolonial literature, having been two of the first authors to publish novels focusing on nations that arose after the dismantling of European colonial empires, Díaz's exploration of Dominican history reflects a more complex colonial perspective. Since the Dominican Republic was under Spanish colonial rule until 1821, was then occupied by the United States from 1914 to 1924, and was subsequently under the reign of Trujillo until 1961, Díaz's novel illustrates structures that developed under the influence of different outside nations and a type of American neo-imperialism not seen in the other two works.

Despite the varied historical and geographic settings for their works, all three authors create a "third space" of family narrative to bridge the dichotomy of literal reality and metaphorical history. The exploration of family histories allows each author to weave together a variety of symbolic elements from personal, subjective experiences and official state narratives to construct national histories that produce substance and meaning by breaking down the binary between literal fact and metaphorical explanation. For Rushdie and Díaz, this space is centered on particular narrative conceits—Rushdie uses Saleem as a literal

embodiment for his metaphor of India, while Díaz employs the larger structure of phallic power and violence to explain the driving social and political forces within the Dominican Republic—whereas Ondaatje incorporates multiple media forms (such as photography, letters, and poetry) to represent the historical fragments that he attempts to assemble into a comprehensible whole. These "third spaces" link to the larger historical narrative through the continued use of symbolic elements and techniques within each novel: the snot of Saleem's grotesque nose in *Midnight's Children*, the blood shed in acts of violence and destruction in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and the multi-media collage of *Running in the Family* all function as recurring literary elements that serve as "bloodlines" for the respective stories. They are intertwined with (or even replace) organic genealogies and help assert and explore the connection between the private experiences of individuals with the broader structures and narrative of the nation's history.

Ultimately, the three authors use their new metaphors and modes of historical production to demonstrate the impossibility of constructing an "essential" or unified origin from the fragments of objective evidence and subjective narrative, and thereby challenge the stability and endurance of each nation's "creation myth." At the conclusion of Rushdie's novel, for example, Saleem's invisible "cracking" after his nasal blockage is finally "cured" suggests that India itself has also been "drained" of the fluids of history and thus may also burst in its attempt to contain so many disparate metaphorical and physical elements; Saleem and India are both disintegrating because there is no longer any historical "fluid" holding them together (Rushdie 531). Likewise, Ondaatje's attempt to access an "authentic" Sri Lanka by recovering his family history serves only to emphasize their estrangement from their homeland; they are participant in certain colonial structures and practices that distance them

from the "true" origin Ondaatje seeks. When Oscar is brutally killed at the end of his novel, Díaz suggests that the cycle of violence will continue, producing more silences and erasures within national and family narratives; the biologic bloodline and reproduction of family cannot overpower violent bloodletting.

Even as these narrative and media conceits are deconstructed, and the novels demonstrate how the grim political realities of life persist, the texts still retain a power of mythical and historical persuasion, illustrating how the act of creative authorship and story-telling is itself a potent counter-discourse to political ambivalence and oppression. True origins may be inaccessible, but a work such as Díaz's still allows Yunior to give symbolic voice to the "nameless lives" who have been factually oppressed and silenced in Dominica. Oscar's horrific murder in the cane fields may be another turn in the cycle of phallic violence and fukú, but Yunior's narrative serves as a "zafa of sorts," offering the possibility and hope of escaping and stopping this repetition of doom and destruction (Díaz 7). Saleem, who cannot reproduce sexually and seems to be heading towards physical and metaphoric disintegration, produces a text he hopes will outlive him as evidence of his own existence and connection to history and of the birth and development of the Indian nation. For Ondaatje, the novel reflects his relationship to a father, family, and nation that he can yet cling to through his own process of construction, even if his father is dead and certain aspects of the homeland remain inaccessible. These three texts thus demonstrate the power of authorship as a method of exploring, producing, and transmitting personal and national narratives, and of crafting a text that becomes a mythic construction in itself.

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