

## Jean-Luc Nancy and Oscar Wao: Singular Plurality and Wondrous Writing

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[**Abstract:** Junot Diaz's 2007 Pulitzer Prize winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* approaches ontological, cultural, and national displacement with a similar sense of stakes and urgency as that of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, making for an exciting and powerful juxtaposition. Nancy's treatment of community, singular plurality, ecstasis, finitude, and expropriation are specifically pertinent to Diaz's text which centers around the violence and terror of what Nancy calls a will to essence as well as and in contrast to the "transformative" potential of singular plurality. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the will to essence is presented in the figure of Trujillo-God and Dominican hyper masculinity/heteronormativity while singular plurality is manifest in Oscar's final writing and experience.]

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“In order for the human to be discovered, and in order for the phrase “human meaning” to acquire some meaning, everything that has ever laid claim to the truth about the nature, essence, or end of “man” must be undone.” — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, xi-xii

“There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being. Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart in order to be itself as such.” — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 2

“Again, it is necessary to stay precisely within the element of wonder, that is, within what could never be properly made into an “element” but is instead an event. How is one to stay in the event? How is one to hold onto it (if that is even an appropriate expression) without turning it into an “element” or a “moment?” Under what conditions can one keep thinking within the surprise, which is its task to think?” — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 166

Although Jean-Luc Nancy has made substantial contributions to critical discourses on community in a variety of fields, scholars of ethnic US American literature have not significantly considered his work.<sup>1</sup> Like any other literary category (or text) concerned with immigration and/or exile, ethnic US American literature will almost necessarily address various aspects of community. The literal displacement and disorientation prompted by immigration or exile gives rise to a philosophical and material confrontation with identity and community that both ethnic US American literature and Nancy address. The basic ontological queries “who am I” and “where do I belong” are particularly salient in the context of cultural and national up rootedness. Nancy has produced three highly influential monographs devoted to the theme of community and directly takes up issues of ethnicity, race, and culture. As such, adding his voice to the conversation can potentially yield tremendous insights into the literary, philosophical, and historical material realms.

The following inquiry will examine a single work from the US Latino literary canon alongside particular elements of Nancy’s philosophical exposition. Junot Diaz’s 2007 Pulitzer Prize winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* approaches ontological, cultural, and national displacement with a similar sense of stakes and urgency as that of Nancy, making for an exciting and powerful juxtaposition. Nancy’s treatment of community, singular plurality, ecstasy, finitude, and expropriation are specifically pertinent to our interpretation of Diaz’s text which will center around the violence and terror of what Nancy calls a *will to essence* as well as and in contrast to the “transformative” potential of singular plurality or the sharing of being. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* this will to essence is presented in the figure of Trujillo-God and Dominican hyper masculinity/heteronormativity while singular plurality is manifest in Oscar’s final writing and experience.

Building from his highly influential first book on community, *The Inoperative Community* (1991), Nancy proposes a complex reexamination of the fundamental premises of

ontology in his seminal 1996 text *Being Singular Plural*. His extensive analysis reveals that being cannot be in any other way than as coexistence, which is to say that being *is* only as between, close, or “distanced proximity” rather than isolated, self-contained and Individual. The names Nancy gives for this ontological primacy of relation are community and “singular plurality” which designate the constitutive being-with of being.<sup>2</sup> As such, being does not originate as a single, individual, and unified subject that is subsequently divided when extending outward and toward an other, but rather, being-with constitutes being itself, a phenomenon which we shall see is manifest in Oscar’s final experiences with and understanding of his greatest and final love, Ybon. These experiences and understandings contrast significantly to his previous teleologically oriented conceptions of himself as a Famous-Author-to-be and Dominican-writer-stud.

The emphasis on ontological movement and witness betrays the influence of Heidegger on Nancy’s thought. Indeed central Heideggarean modalities such as “finitude” and “ekstasis” are crucial components of singular plurality and Nancy’s thought is more fruitfully engaged with said consideration. In brief, Heideggarean ekstasis refers to beings primordial outward extension, a crucial point of Nancy’s reworking of another Heideggarean term, *mitsein* (being-with).<sup>3</sup> Rough and reductive though it is, we could do worse than summarize Nancy’s entire oeuvre on community as an attempt to rethink the Western metaphysical ontological tradition according to the primacy of being-with (*mitsein*) and the ecstatic movement that characterizes it.<sup>4</sup> Like Heidegger, Nancy deconstructs the classical presupposition that being is as an individual and self-enclosed entity. However, Nancy extends Heideggarean thought in that he maintains that *mitsein* is the very condition of possibility of existence.

A basic Heideggarean understanding of finitude is also crucial to Nancy’s project. Finitude is the difference and rupture that *is* ekstastic being and more specifically refers to the aspect of rupture/ekstasis that refuses ground, enclosure, totality, and identity (given its non-teleological extension and movement outward). That which necessarily and always-already moves -toward cannot be a “One” (or self same) and rather exists as differing from itself and/or difference itself. In a distinct but related sense, finitude also indicates the inevitability of death and being’s correspondingly radical fragmentation. For Nancy, the eventual non-being of being toward which we are all hurdling is as profoundly non-recuperable and ungroundable as being itself. To imbue death with a groundable reason, meaning, or logic would be to make a work of

death or to make it “operable” which is for Nancy, to make it mean something other than itself. When we imbue death with a recuperable and meaningful sense, such as dying for one’s country or becoming part of the earth in an organic unity, we impose upon it a resolution that is not properly its own. For death to “speak” the significance that *is* its own we must allow it to maintain its meaningless quality.

Finitude (or difference and death) is an ontological event rather than a ground and to appreciate the meaningless meaning of being we must understand it as such. Being is constituted by finitude, which is to say both “I am not one” and “I am going to die.” Or again, finitude is characterized both by the difference that being is and the intractable fact of mortality. If we give being and/or death a ground or absolute meaning, we strip it of that which makes being be, which is its event-like status. As we will see, this kind of recognition and understanding is amply manifest at the end of the text and life of Oscar Wao.

As the opposite of a traditional understanding of the ontological Proper and its will to essence and totality, expropriation in Nancy’s lexicon is this ceaseless event, groundlessly grounding being as a perpetual verb that rejects all of our stabilizing and metaphysical impulses.<sup>5</sup> Various invoked (and with distinct connotations) as expropriation, ekstasis, finitude, community, being, mitsein, and singular plurality, this basic component of being’s non-coincidence with itself is central to Nancy’s analysis of community.

Given that singular plurality is a constitutive ontological event of finitude and ekstasis, we can readily see that difference (in contrast to oneness, the Proper, or identity) is a privileged anti-structure for Nancy. Utterly and obstinately evading all attempts to ground it, the difference that is singular plurality (or being and as we will see, writing) is an event rather than a substance and thus strictly speaking, impossible to name and strictly speaking, identify. However, it is in some way perceivable. When experiencing or understanding ourselves as ruptured or shattered (not one), such as when falling in love or being heart-broken, we get a glimpse of a “reverberating shock” of the difference that we are (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, xvi). This shock of difference is itself (as a not-itself) a part of the witness that it is to be. Similarly, language underscores finitude. Given the impossibility of an origin or end point of signification or writing, we have long been aware of the constitutive absence therein.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Oscar becomes poignantly aware of the radical power of this “shock” of difference by the end of Diaz’s text and perceives an arguably “wondrous” element of being as a result. This “wonder” is both

that of which Nancy speaks in the epigraph (“It is necessary to stay within the element of “wonder”) as well as that referenced in the title of Diaz’s text. Arguably, for both Nancy and Diaz, these are the stakes. Nancy asks how we might “stay within the event of being” and think it or represent it without turning it into an “element” or substance? As we shall see, Oscar Wao’s final pages (in the sense of Diaz’s text and Oscar’s) provide us with a possible answer.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to “the event of being” privileged by Nancy and Diaz alike, notions of being as a self-same entity (or identity as it is more commonly called), that have persistently governed Western metaphysics have been naturalized, assuming various shapes and forms.<sup>8</sup> God, the One, and the Proper are three primary identity figurations. These logics of identity have unleashed inconceivable horror throughout the world and are Nancy’s clear targets in *Being Singular Plural* and Diaz’s in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. His philosophical exposition of the singular plural of being is indeed plainly historically situated and presented as an imperative that cannot be ignored:

I want to emphasize the date on which I am writing this. It is the summer of 1995, and as far specifying the situation of the earth and humans is concerned, nothing is more pressing (how could it really be avoided) than a list of proper names such as these, presented here in no particular order: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Rwanda, Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Tamil Tigers... Of course it would be difficult to bring this list to an end if the aim was to include all places, groups, or authorities that constitute the theater of bloody conflicts amongst identities, as well as what is at stake in these conflicts. (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, xii)

The “bloody conflicts amongst identities” are readily manifest in the proper names that seek to totalize and cement identity, rendering it absolute and self-contained. Nancy more than urges us to think through singular plurality as the stakes are of the highest order. As of now, we are failing to address it, which is in some sense to fail to recognize the primacy of the address.<sup>9</sup> Our world is thus one in which we are “keeping accounts but never taking the final toll” and one “that does not even manage to constitute a world...It is a litany, a prayer of pure sorrow and pure loss”

(Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, xiii). The only possibility for a world is in a thinking of being-with or the coexistence that is existence.

Elements of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Nancy's *Being Singular Plural* can be juxtaposed in such a way that singular plurality and its stakes speak in a particularly striking voice. In distinct genres and manners, Diaz and Nancy address the horrors of conceiving of being as an Individual and the contrasting potential wonder (and even "beauty") of an ontology of coexistence. Nancy treats the philosophical specifics of singular plurality while maintaining a focus on how a failure to perceive coexistence is integrally related to disastrous historical events. Diaz's text illustrates how tyrannical conceptions of identity as well as "withness" can and do manifest in material situations, presenting characters struggling against essentializing impulses that oppose singular plurality. Both emphasize that the logic of the One, Proper, or Individual is the same as those of (racial, gender, or ethnic) purity and authenticity and all attempt to deny singular plurality and its extension and difference. For example, both Nancy and Diaz illustrate how Western phallogocentric notions of the Individual provide a conceptual base for genocide and necessarily attempt to thwart singular plurality and the finitude and ekstasis so central to it.

In the context of Nancian singular plurality and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, we must not make an opposition of individual/community. Being and meaning are events that happens as the between of beings and as such, strictly speaking, the very notion of an Individual and by extension Community is, to use Barthes' term, a mythology. Nancy discusses both Nazism and the "ethnic cleansing" of Sarajevo as historical examples of the logic of the individual (or identity) put to work.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in copious footnotes as well as throughout the body of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Diaz addresses actual manifestations of essentializing thinking vis a vis the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. We need to understand clearly that the oppression and suffering that Oscar and other characters experience(s) is more than merely related to the tyrannical and literally murderous theory and praxis of "the individual." Rather, we must bear in mind that they emerge from the same logic of the same.

Although not chronologically narrated, a sequential restructuring of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals that the story of the de Leon family begins with Oscar's maternal grandfather, Abelard Luis Cabral, and his struggles to survive in the Dominican Republic within

the uber-oppressive and violent Trujillo regime (1930-1961). From the moment Trujillo directed his ruthless sexual appetite onto Abelard's daughter Jackie, the family unraveled. Abelard refused to "hand over" Jackie but simultaneously failed to remove his family from the country, the only way in which they would have had any chance of survival. Since many Dominicans believed that Trujillo had supernaturally evil powers (possessing or channeling the Fuku, the great curse brought to the "New World" with and as colonization), Oscar and others thought the family cursed from that point forward. Indeed Abelard was tortured in a notorious Trujillo prison camp where he eventually died and his wife and both daughters died inexplicable and violent deaths shortly thereafter. However, the daughter with whom Abelard's wife Socorro, was pregnant at the time of initial imprisonment, Hypatia Belicia Cabral, managed to survive. Thanks to the care of a distant cousin, Beli (barely) lived to adulthood, immigrated to New Jersey and bore two children of her own, Lola and Oscar. Although a small portion of the text is told from Lola's first person perspective, the majority is presented in the narrative voice of Yuniors, Oscar's friend and Lola's sometime boyfriend, as a reconstruction of Oscar's letters and journals and a recollection of personal involvement with the family. Although the lives of Abelard, Beli, Yuniors, and Lola are also recounted in the text, Oscar's "brief, wondrous life" forms the bulk and thrust of the narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Oscar's inability to meet the allegedly authentic Dominican standards that his family and culture place upon him is a central aspect of the text. Rather than supposedly characteristic (indeed defining) Dominican male swagger and hyper-confidence Oscar is the embodiment of social inability and isolation, veritably consumed by both the great and unrequited loves of his life and his immersion in a science-fiction/fantasy genre that largely contextualize it. Although his "community" never tires of reminding him of the scandal (he defies and perverts Dominican male Nature), Oscar remains virginal throughout and following his college years in New Jersey. In spite of the fact that he is continuously advised to lose weight, curb his penchant for sophisticated vocabulary, and cure his virginal ills by simply "taking care of business" with a prostitute, Oscar refuses. Rejecting (and yet as we will see, simultaneously participating in) the dominant narrative of the conquering heteronormative Dominican man, Oscar quite simply wants both sex and love.<sup>12</sup>

We could do worse than summarize *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a tracing of Oscar's quest to reach the goal of romantic partnership in the face of a larger "community"

and arguably national/diasporic valuing of something like the opposite: heteronormative power manifest through sexual dominance and phallogocentrism. This occurs in larger terms in Trujillo's dictatorship and in more immediate ones such as the overwhelming conception of Dominican male identity in Oscar's family and geographic (traditionally conceived) community. The ways in which the Trujillo regime and its notorious prison/torture camps, conceptions and structures of race, gender, and sexuality, speak the logic and tyranny of the Proper, One and Absolute, are quite clear. Trujillo created a nation-mirror, more than insinuating himself as the country's God. It is no accident that "God and Trujillo" was the national slogan he demanded during his reign of terror. In copious footnotes Diaz meticulously documents Trujillo's megalomania in the renaming of streets, towns, and cities to some version of "Trujillo," a literal re-presentation of the Proper name.<sup>13</sup> Further, responsible for the Haitian genocide, the dictator's attempt to exterminate those deemed "impure" (a figure of difference conceived as contamination rather than self-same identity) made horrifically real the essentializing logic we have been discussing. Lastly, Trujillo's notorious use of rape and torture as a means of control and power are also presented in great detail, reflecting a general understanding of heteronormative male dominance and power and female objectification and victimization.

But not as immediately evident is the manner in which Oscar's own life is marked by distinct manifestations of an oxymoronical desire for the Proper or Essential. Here, Dominican heteronormativity and phallogocentrism conceived as Natural is the central figuration of the Proper.<sup>14</sup> Oscar's quests for romantic love and Authorial recognition are frequently contextualized by teleology and conquest (both representations of essentializing understandings), amply evident in his high-school dreams and fantasies:

These were Oscar's furies, his personal pantheon, the girls he most dreamed about and most beat off to and who eventually found their way into his little stories. In his dreams he was either saving them from aliens or he was returning to the neighborhood, rich and famous---It's him! The Dominican Stephen King!---and then Marisol would appear, carrying one of each of his books for him to sign. Please, Oscar, marry me. Oscar drolly: I'm sorry, Marisol, I don't marry ignorant bitches. (But then of course he would.) Maritza he still watched from afar convinced that one day,



when the nuclear bombs fell (or the plague broke out or the Tripods invaded) and civilization was wiped out he would end up saving her from a pack of irradiated ghouls and together they'd set out across a ravaged America in search of a better tomorrow. (Diaz, 27)

Although he seeks to achieve, complete, and arrive at his stereotypically dominating Dominican male identity via writing (his books) and rescue (his furies when the apocalypse comes) rather than via annihilation and physical violence à la Trujillo and his cultural community, he nonetheless participates in phallogocentrism by cultivating narratives that foreground a teleological and power/fame-driven understanding of both authorship and romantic love. Oscar's writing is herein conceived as a way in which he could complete the central projects of his life: his male subjectivity/dominance and his books. In so doing he could finally arrive at the "Proper Oscar" that he desires, which is to say, he could complete himself. He has aspirations of fame, recognition, and achievement, and even more saliently an image of himself as powerful and dominating in the context of women. In this sense he repeats rather than transgresses the gestures of his culture that so despise him for not possessing any of the "Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male" and reifies traditional and essential understandings of identity, and more specifically here, gender and culture (Diaz, 19).

Arguably, the cultural preoccupation with a violently oppressive Dominican male identity and Oscar's teleological orientation regarding his own are distinct manifestations of the same logic. The prior evinces a will to authenticity or purity vis à vis biological/gender/ethnic essentialism and the fully present meaning it allegedly provides. The latter implicitly retains a belief in arrival and fully present meaning achieved through completion, in this case of romantic love and to some degree, his magnum opus. Singular plurality precisely denies such substance and arrival. Thus while Oscar's socially and romantically inept being throws a wrench in a tyrannical logic of essential being and community (he simply cannot be Dominican and be so sexually awkward as the identity and community are necessarily the same; Oscar is supposed to be a single embodiment of an absolute category- Dominican), the orientation with which he has replaced this larger hegemonic structure is a teleology and thus another manifestation of the will to fully present and transparent meaning and being.

So how does he change? What allows Oscar to transition from “closet” Dominican essentialist to the being who experiences the “wondrous” events of singular plurality? An emphatically circled panel from Oscar’s favorite graphic novel *Watchmen* is worthy of close attention in this regard as it was not only his go-to text par excellence and the single book he brought with him on his final journey to the Dominican Republic, but it was the only text that he had ever defaced.<sup>15</sup> Yunion discovered the novel after Oscar’s death and noted that the panel had been circled in the same pen as that with which Oscar had written his last letters. The crucial panel in question is that in which “Veidt says: I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end? And Manhattan, before fading from our Universe, replies: “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (Cited in Diaz, 331). While Veidt attempts to conclusively ground, justify, and defend his murderous actions (he has annihilated New York City in order to save the world) and seeks reassurance from Manhattan, Manhattan denies him, replying, “Nothing ends.” In this context, the denial of “the end” can be seen as a denial of ground or if pushed slightly further, a denial of “the end” or goal of the human (as in “the ends justify the means” which is certainly a relevant expression given Veidt’s query to Manhattan). Although the apparent meaning of “nothing ends” is that “everything continues” (which appears to be the opposite of Nancian finitude and its highlighting of radical mortal fragmentation (death) and ontological difference), if read more closely, another interpretation becomes possible.<sup>16</sup> Indeed if “ends” signifies telos, as in Derrida’s seminal “The Ends of Man, then a reading emerges in which teleology or “ends” is impossible given that nothing has an “end.” In Oscar’s circling of the end-defying panel that rejects murder as a “means to an end” he highlights the importance of finitude (there is no telos or end as in goal or/as ground), ekstasis, and singular plurality, which is the opposite of the teleological or “end” orientation that had preciously governed Oscar’s thought and life as the desire for the achievement/completion of his magnum opus (writing) and being (dominant heteronormative Dominican masculinity).

The end as Proper, goal, and ground is also belied in the absence of Oscar’s voice throughout the text as well as in the non-arrival of his last creative effort. Before Oscar is murdered in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic he sends a final package home that contains two manuscripts and a letter to Lola, which is “the last thing he wrote, apparently, before he was killed” (Diaz, 333). In the letter, Oscar instructs Lola to “watch out for a second package” that “contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you will

need. You'll understand when you read my conclusions. (It's the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA)" (Diaz, 333). Just like Oscar's proper voice in the larger narrative that is told by Yuniór, the final letter itself is never presented and rather it is Yuniór's voice that relays Oscar's.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the text-to-come never arrives. Appropriately then, we are not presented with the contents of the letter per se and neither the characters nor the readers are privy to Oscar's final book. The partial textual absence of the letter (it is simultaneously present and absent- present in that it is told by Yuniór but absent insofar as we readers do not have access to the letter itself) and full absence of Oscar's package (it never arrives) combined with the fact that they are implied and anticipated underscores the deferral of writing and being. This endless deferral of signification is highly pertinent to finitude as we have discussed it and that which we will see Oscar in some way understands by the end of his life.<sup>18</sup>

Oscar's "defacing" of the *Watchmen* text is particularly significant in the context of his self-proclaimed discovery of "the cure to what ails us" that he indicates he had found in his final letter to Lola. Since the letter is written in the same pen in which he circled the *Watchmen* panel we can make multiple connections. First, Oscar's discovery of "the cure to what ails us" is in some way related to his new understanding of "ends" evinced by his circling of the panel addressing this theme. Secondly, this potential zafa or cure (antidote to the Fuku of colonization, a logic undeniably grounded on essentializing logics which necessarily denigrate the "savage" Other) involving a new understanding of "ends" arguably enabled him to "deface" or "mark" a text for the first time which indicates a new relationship to textuality. In this sense an alleged textual "purity" that demands a respect for the text-as-it-is is transgressed and Oscar is able to literally signify on it, thus rendering it an intertextual entity rather than an essential one. This notion of intertextuality (so significant to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in both textual and ontological senses) is recognized when Oscar is able to re-read the notion of "ends" in the senses of ground and teleology.

Oscar's shifted (and shifting) non-teleological engagement with and in love and writing happens largely in terms of "intimacy." According to Yuniór, in the ultimate letter that Lola received Oscar revealed that he did in fact finally have sex with the woman he loved, Ybon. At this point he experiences the "wonder" of a constitutive witness and thematizes it directly. Oscar is plainly not as struck by sex or the loss of his virginity as he is by simple ways of being with Ybon. In other words, Oscar is *moved* (or "shocked," disrupted, or shared) not by the

penetration and conquest of sex as he would be if he were preoccupied with achieving his dominant heteronormative Dominican masculinity, but rather by “the little intimacies.”<sup>19</sup> Thus it was not:

...the bam bam bam of sex that got him but rather...the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face on his neck. The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a girl and him telling her that he'd been a virgin all his life. He wrote: So this is what everybody's always talking about. Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!” (Diaz, 335)

It is not until the final pages of the text when Oscar is both with Ybon and composes a text that literally fails to arrive at its destination, that he understands a “wondrous” and “end” defying experience of “intimacies” and “beauty” which can be read as an eruption of finitude. While throughout most of the narrative he struggles for and reaches toward the heavily anticipated attainment of romantic love and the corresponding loss of his virginity (and the fame that will follow the completion of his literary oeuvre), by the end of his brief life he appears to understand his existence in terms of the impossibility of such “ends.” His last letter and the final words of the text reveal that he rather embraces the extension of the “with” that he experiences as “intimacies.” Such extension vis a vis “intimacy” is crucial as it exposes him to an unimaginable “beauty.” The “intimacies like listening to her tell him” and “him telling her” that ultimately “got him” speak volumes in terms of Oscar's experiences with Ybon. One of the various significations of “intimacy” is “improper” or the negative of the proper. Fittingly, Oscar's description of his time with Ybon indicates an appreciation of events and movements over proper ground and of the impossibility of teleological “ends” and arrivals, something Oscar has been missing (both in terms of interpretation and experience) throughout the/his text. The “little intimacies” arguably evoke Nancy's withness or singular plurality and are the opposite of “the proper” as unity, oneness, and ontological completion or end. In other words, to be intimate is not to be one (or to be ruptured by the constitutive difference of being), and this is what ultimately “got” Oscar and Oscar got.

Likewise the description evokes intimacy as *sharing* (in both the colloquial and philosophical senses). Two very standard ways of signifying intimacy in English involve “sharing” which often indicates either a “telling” to one another or a physical and/or verbal sharing as “closeness.” Sharing is also a central Nancian term highly related to singular plurality that indicates that which is outside of signification and simultaneously breaks (as in ruptures) and makes us (as beings). For Nancy, sharing must be understood as “partage,” to be opened out and toward and at the same time to be ruptured (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 25). Oscar finally understood and experienced this sharing with Ybon and as such “got” the meaning of our second epigraph which bears repeating: “there is no meaning if meaning is not shared...because meaning is itself the sharing of Being. Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence apart in order to be itself as such.” To share and be shared is then precisely a turning away from the proper, the logic and tyranny of the One, which has perpetuated unthinkable violence and horror throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Further, by definition, to be close is necessarily not to arrive (the end) which is again, what Oscar recognizes that he had not been “getting.” Perhaps equally significant is the explosion of narratives of phallogocentric power and domination that saturate the text. In Oscar’s life-changing experience with Ybon, one of the intimacies that “got him” was indeed picking up her underwear off a line. Subversive in both form and content, Oscar is moved by performing a domestic duty of sorts (handling laundry) and further by one which involves generosity (it is *her* underwear that he retrieves), the opposite of the dis-robing (and in this context this is not insignificant, particularly given Ybon’s stripping career), and a certain vulnerability therein. Further, Oscar’s expected but non-arriving final text can be understood as a performance of the “little intimacies” that he experiences and for which he is so grateful. Rather than completing his oeuvre (and himself), Oscar gestures toward a final and definitive text that *fails* to arrive and yet is always expected, literally a messianic text and once again, that which flies in the face of the law of the proper.

Difference, rupture, shattering, and sharing, so central to love, writing, and singular plurality, are denied in all notions and manifestations of authenticity and teleology, a situation that is painfully clear in the heteronormative and oppressive mythology of Dominican male sexuality. The conquering mentality of the Dominican male (more than amply described in the lives of Trujillo and Tio and for most of the text Yunion himself) and the oppression and will to essence of the Trujillo regime are inextricably linked in their “proper” foundation or

appropriative movements. The antidote or “zafa” for all of this desire to ground meaning and being in an Absolute manifests in and as love, writing, and singular plurality. If we understand singular plurality as potentially “speaking” in love and writing (given that they are necessarily constituted by a “with,” difference, and its movement), then the ostensible authenticity and sameness that fuels the logics of colonization (the Fuku) and Dominican manhood, necessarily attempts to thwart them. When being is reduced to an “end,” project, or essence, shaped by (and continuing to shape) discourses and structures of the individual or proper, what is left for us? How can singular plurality and the finitude that it speaks shatter against the law of the proper, the will to authenticity and purity that so overwhelms our world and the world of the characters in Diaz’s text? The “wonder” that Oscar finally experiences near the close of the text is arguably a result of a new perception of love and writing, a perception that is not perceived (or perceivable) as such, but is rather a rupture of the improper that cuts through the teleology that pure presence or identity awaits. More specifically, the singular plurality that *we are* manifests in the final days of Oscar’s life as intimacy (with Ybon) and non-arrival (of his final text) and occurs shortly before his murder in the Dominican Republic. Although the “recognition” of finitude in singular plurality does not save him, for Oscar’s brief life it makes a tremendous difference, exposing him to a “beauty” that is expropriation or the toward movement of singular plurality.

On personal, national, and cultural levels, in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the cause of the oppression and violence we have discussed emerges from a logic of the individual, proper, or same. When being is understood as an essential category in a transparently meaningful and essential world, being is reduced to an object or project, a thing amongst things or a means to an end and countless horrors follow.<sup>20</sup> Thus although there is an obvious distinction between Oscar’s personal anguish at his failure to be “a real Dominican man” and the Haitian genocide or Trujillo’s prison camps, they are nonetheless entirely related as they rest upon the same violent logic of identity and the various crimes associated with it. Indeed these are all part of the “bloody conflict amongst identities” about which Nancy warns us in *Being Singular Plural*. Conversely, and in a similarly encompassing fashion, conceiving of being as being-with or singularly plural changes everything.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an examination of Nancy's work on community alongside Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ana Menendez's *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* see Ana Luszczynska's *The Ethics of Community*. In a distinct but related manner Patrick Manning presents a provocative reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as it pertains to Derridean notions of hospitality, the Freudian uncanny, and the immigrant experience in the US. See "To Become a Nomad": Exploring Minor Literature through Hospitality and the Uncanny in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." For a particularly interesting discussion of the potential dialogue between Cultural Studies scholarship more broadly and Nancy's work on community see J. Hillis Miller's "Crossroads of Philosophy and Cultural Studies: Body, Context, Performativity, Community" in "Romantic Circles Praxis Series" Ed. Orin N.C. Wang

<sup>2</sup> Nancy uses the term "community" in *The Inoperative Community* and singular plurality in *Being Singular Plural*.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

<sup>4</sup> See *Being Singular Plural*, Preface, xv

<sup>5</sup> See Derrida's "The Ends of Man" in *Margins* for an extensive critique of Heidegger's use of "the proper" of man in "Letter on Humanism" in *Basic Writings*. Also, see Nancy's "The Free Voice of Man" in *Retreating the Political* for a fascinating response to Derrida's "The Ends of Man."

<sup>6</sup> Derridean "differance," the deferral and differing that constitutes signification or meaning, is by now well established in many if not most approaches within literary, cultural, and continental philosophical studies.

<sup>7</sup>For a compelling alternative interpretation of the conclusion of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* see Ramon Saldivar's "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction. According to Saldivar the text offers three "attempts at an ending" which "work" insofar as they avoid resorting to "sentimentalism, postmodern irony, or metafictional play." Saldivar 590-591. Our reading differs from Saldivar's insofar as it underscores Oscar's experience of "wonder" at the close of the/his text as a transformative experience of singular plurality.

<sup>8</sup>See Barthes' classic *Mythologies* for still compelling discussions of the naturalizing of cultural phenomenon in 1950's France.

<sup>9</sup> As that which highlights the relation between beings and constitutes being itself, singular plurality is imbued with the "address" or that which, by definition, extends from one being to another. Like being, the address relies upon the other for its existence (the other to whom it is necessarily extended to be itself as such).

<sup>10</sup> See *The Inoperative Community* and *Being Singular Plural* respectively.

<sup>11</sup>For an alternative approach see Machado-Saez's "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora": Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance" in *Contemporary Literature*. Machado-Saez argues that the real protagonist of the novel is Yuniors given that it is his narrative voice that dictates Oscar's story, effectively "silencing" his queerness. In our reading Juniors presence as narrator of Oscar's story in no way effaces Oscar's otherness but rather further highlights/performs the deferral/difference of being and writing at stake in the novel. Juniors narration of Oscar's life presents the "wondrous" power of singular plurality versus the tyrannical violence of absolute identity. Indeed the deferral in narrative voice is another manifestation of the constitutive difference of both signification and being.

<sup>12</sup>Machado-Saez reads Oscar's virginity and "sentimentality" (what I am calling "desire for romantic love") as his "points of Queer Otherness" that Juniors dictation silences.

<sup>13</sup> In "Reassembling the Fragments": Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" Monica Hanna identifies a similar dynamic in Trujillo's equation of himself with God when she states that "Trujillo thus becomes the equivalent of a god in the national imaginary, an idea reinforced by his god-like powers to name and create" (503).

<sup>14</sup> The desire for the Proper is oxymoronic insofar as desire, by definition, is that which ruptures being, engenders difference, and renders identity or the Proper, impossible. To desire is thus to be which is to say, to be as ruptured difference, or what Nancy calls, shared (partage). To desire (to be as difference) the Proper (the self same or One) is thus to want that which would preclude desire itself. For a concise discussion of the "strange logic" of the desire for presence see Barbara Johnson's introduction to Derrida's *Dissemination*.

<sup>15</sup> Dave Gibbons and Allen Moore, *Watchmen*.



<sup>16</sup>Indeed Saldivar's reading of the end of the novel which highlights the "nothing ends" panel of *Watchmen* is that it compromises Oscar's hope for a "stronger loving world" and Yuniór's "hope" and "dream" that Oscar's niece will somehow evade the Fuku. Their "sentimental wish for an achieved happy ending" is, according to Saldivar, indicated to be impossible given the emphatically circled panel that apparently suggests that political oppression, tyranny, and violence will never "end." However, it is clear that Veidt and Manhattan are working from two distinct meanings of the word "end." For Veidt "the end" of "I did the right thing in the end?" indicates "in the final analysis" or "at last" whereas for Manhattan the term signifies termination or fragmentation, which he suggests is impossible. It thus seems reasonable to add a third interpretation of "the end" in which it means "goal" or "telos," a signification plainly related to the senses of the word of both Veidt and Manhattan.

<sup>17</sup>These elements and moments of deferral of origin or the Proper are performative of the larger theme of difference and its denial of a tyrannical identity. Again this reading contrasts to that of Machado-Saez who views Junior's narrative voice as a silencing of Oscar's.

<sup>18</sup>In a distinct but somewhat related study Patrick Manning's "To Become a Nomad: Exploring Minor Literature through Hospitality and the Uncanny in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" explores the role of Derridean hospitality in the text and for the immigrant experience more broadly. The non-representational aspect of language and writing, an aspect of the deferral we have been examining, as well as the importance of an opening to the radical alterity of the other (being's extension outward or "shared" aspect) are also central concerns in Manning's analysis.

<sup>19</sup>For an opposing interpretation of Oscar's loss of virginity near the close of the novel, see Machado-Saez who reads this event as Oscar's achievement of Dominican heteronormativity. In contrast to Machado-Saez we read Oscar's experience (as told by Yuniór from a letter to Lola) and valuing of "little intimacies" as more queer than heteronormative insofar as these experiences defy representation (are in some way uncanny or unheimlich) and gender binaries evincing something like singular plurality and ekstasis.

<sup>20</sup> This mythology of fully transparent meaning is precisely what Barthes tackles in his readings of cultural phenomenon in *Mythologies*.

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