

Between Worlds

by Jordan Baker

It didn't take too long before I had decided that I liked Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In fact, you could argue that I liked it before I even started reading it, since the moment I knew I was going to like it came before page one. Appropriately, it exists in some kind of phantom zone, page Negative Five, where the quote "Of what import are brief, nameless lives... to **Galactus??**" is the first thing to greet a reader's eyes. Some readers may not know who or what Galactus is, though most have probably at least heard of Stan Lee or the Fantastic Four, at least enough to recognize it as a comic book reference. Personally, I needed no help in recognizing the name of the world eater or his creators, Lee and Jack Kirby, but I am not like the "average reader" for a number of reasons. Here are some facts:

1. My father owns more than 100 Star Trek novels, and this is what turned me into a reader.
2. Most of the top row of my bookshelf is taken up by Isaac Asimov, and most of the fourth row is graphic novels either about Batman or by Alan Moore.
3. I own a copy of *Incredible Hulk* #180, which features the first appearance of Wolverine, introducing him as "The World's First and Greatest Canadian Superhero!"
4. I saw *The Dark Knight* five times in the theater.

That's right, ladies and gentlemen, I am a nerd, just like Junot Diaz, and just like Oscar. Well, not like Oscar – I never felt like an outcast on account of my tastes – but Oscar has his share of other problems contributing to his outsider status. In an age when films based on *The Lord of the Rings* and Batman comics win Academy Awards, nerd culture is less marginalized now than it ever was before, but Oscar is more than just a nerd; he's the King of the Nerds (IDIC instead of INRI).¹ Describing Oscar, Diaz says he “Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman² in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic” (21). Oscar's nerdiness is one of his defining characteristics, and the references to comic books throughout the novel serve to bring the reader in to Oscar's world, the world of an immigrant.

Being a nerd places Oscar well outside the cultural norms we might generally associate with Dominican immigrants. Speculating on the cause of Oscar's nerdiness, Diaz writes, “It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey – a single greencard shifting not

¹ Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, or IDIC, is one of the fundamental elements of Vulcan philosophy; INRI, of course, is a Latin acronym for *IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM*, meaning Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, and according to the Bible this sign was hung above Jesus on the cross.

² These are some of the few references that escaped me. Having used the black magic of the Internet, I can now report to you that the Slan are a race of evolved human superbeings from a novel (also called *Slan*) by A.E. van Vogt. The Dorsai are a splinter group of humans who hire themselves out as mercenaries because their planet is poor in resources in Gordon R. Dickinson's *Dorsai!*, and Edward Elmer "Doc" Smith's *Lensman* series is a six-book sci-fi saga that I am hardly capable of summarizing here, and my ignorance of it brings shame upon me and my house.

only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)” (21-22). Oscar is constantly stuck between two worlds, two cultures, an epic battle constantly taking place within him and without him, a battle between being Dominican and American, being a player and being a nerd, being a loser and finally standing up for yourself. He doesn’t fit in with the nerds, because he’s Dominican, and he doesn’t fit in with the Dominicans, because he’s a nerd. In a study of comic book culture, Matthew Pustz found comic book culture to be “distinct from fan cultures associated with other media and pop cultures,” because in comic book culture “fan involvement... extends beyond the act of consumption and entails multiple levels of cultural engagement” (111-112). In the nerd culture he can find a cultural language and collective identity that is otherwise denied to him, though his Dominican heritage no doubt made him an odd sight at comic book shops.

It’s not hard to see what Oscar may have liked so much about superheroes. Superheroes, you see, are often immigrants themselves, and the references become an appropriate metaphor for Oscar’s immigrant experience. Interviewing Diaz, Edwidge Danticat says Diaz “often talk[s] about the immigration experience as resembling space travel in the sense that you leave one completely different world, get in a steel machine that flies and suddenly you’re a resident of a vastly different planet.” Sounds like the origin story of Superman (a character created by the children of immigrants), the Last Son of Krypton, put in a rocket as an infant and sent to a foreign world so that he might survive the destruction of his race. Superman is hardly the only superhero immigrant, however. J’onn J’onzz is the last

Martian³. Wonder Woman is an immigrant to the world of men. The Silver Surfer abandoned his homeworld to save it and now wanders the cosmos alone. Bruce Wayne is the final heir of a long family dynasty. Oscar clearly identifies with these immigrants and orphans. Nearly every superhero has a secret identity, a disguise that allows them to blend in temporarily with the normal people, but this forces them to live in two worlds (as Oscar does), and the two lives get in the way of each other, whether they're the lives of Oscar the American and Oscar the Dominican or Peter Parker (nerd) and Spider-Man (outcast).

Unfortunately for Oscar, he's all Clark Kent and no Superman, as if Kal-El's rocket had landed under a red sun. His Dominican heritage is supposed to give him superpowers, "Atomic Level G," (24) but instead he finds himself unable to access the heritage he's told is his. Many superheroes become superheroes because they don't "fit in" to normal society on account of their extraordinary powers. It could perhaps be argued that Oscar becomes a nerd because he doesn't "fit in" in normal society on account of his *lack* of extraordinary powers. He has "none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male" (19). Diaz himself says in an interview, "In the Dominican culture I know, someone like Oscar would not be labeled Dominican" (Danticat).

Diaz seems to have lived in two worlds in his own way as well. In the same interview, Diaz talks about his military father, and says that in his family, "you were only a human being if you were an aggressor." He refers to himself as a "nerd who

³ One of the lesser-known members of the Justice League, J'onn J'onzz (John Jones) is known as the Martian Manhunter. His powers include flight, shape-shifting, telepathy, and strength on par with that of Superman, and he played a large role on Cartoon Network's excellent *Justice League* and *Justice League Unlimited* series.

had all this ‘man’ training.” This statement actually identifies Diaz more with Yuniior than with Oscar. Yuniior is also stuck in two worlds, the world of the atomic-G jock and the world of the nerd. Yuniior has the “man” powers Oscar longs for desperately (not that he puts them to good use). It could be that Oscar sees himself as Yuniior’s sidekick to a certain extent, his Jimmy Olsen. After all, Jimmy may not have had powers of his own, but Superman sometimes figured out ways for him to temporarily have powers, and he even had his own comic book for a while⁴. The only problem is that Yuniior’s no Superman, and his attempts to “power-up” Oscar – “I’ll change your life” (175) – while well intentioned, ultimately prove fruitless. Oscar won’t be getting his own comic book with Yuniior’s help.

In his review of the book, Deresiewicz writes, “It’s about remaining what you were and the suspicion, or hope, that you’ll never become American. It’s about how Nueva York is less a new start than another chapter in the same old story” (37). Comic books are, in many ways, the same stories constantly retold. Even without comparisons to the “hero’s quest” or musings on the ways in which superheroes represent a modern mythology, comic book stories are constantly being retold. Many of the most popular characters have been around for more than 70 years, and they have been constantly updated and modernized in the intervening time. At first Batman used a gun and killed people. Then he became a colorful and campy character in the comics, and when the comics started getting darker again the Adam West TV show aired and cast the campy vision into the public eye. The comics

⁴ *Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen* ran from 1954 to 1974, with more than 160 issues, some of which are in a closet in the basement at my parent’s house.

became darker and darker until *The Dark Knight Returns*⁵ (which Diaz references on page 148), which eventually led to Tim Burton's Batman film. But no matter how many changes and revisions and updates the character of Batman endures, he remains in essence the same – a wealthy orphan using his considerable resources to battle crime as a masked vigilante. Heath Ledger's portrayal of The Joker in the latest Batman film may have seemed remarkably modern to most viewers, but director Christopher Nolan stated repeatedly that a great deal of their inspiration came from The Joker's earliest comic book appearances. Nueva York may be more modern than the DR, but the story's fundamental elements remain the same, and Oscar it seems is caught up in a story much larger than himself, considerable as his girth is, and the fukú that haunted his family there haunts them still.

The effect of all this is that the reader begins to see the world as Oscar does, a world of heroes and villains, a world of fukús and fate, a world in which Oscar does not fit. Oscar believes that there is some secret inside him, some destiny that he does not discover till the novels end, and that even then eludes the reader. The idea of a secret purpose or destiny, that fate conspires against the hero who must overcome it, is also incredibly prevalent in comic books. Superheroes become as they are to serve a purpose. As Uncle Ben tells Peter Parker, "With great power comes great responsibility." Oscar spends his whole life looking for the power he seems to be missing, only finding it in time to die, sacrificing himself to try to break

⁵ Generally considered one of the two graphic novels everyone must read, the other being Allen Moore's also-referenced *Watchmen*.

the curse, like the Barry Allen in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*⁶, or Superman, hammering at Doomsday with his final breath⁷.

They also help create an immigrant experience for the reader. In an interview for NPR, Diaz says that he wanted “everybody at one moment to kind of feel like an immigrant in this book, that there would be one language chain that you might not get.” Between the constant references to literature and nerd culture and the use of Dominican Spanish throughout the novel, it would be a rare person indeed who would be able to understand everything Diaz says, making readers feel like they are in a foreign realm themselves. Diaz says, “The experience that most of us have in the world is that we tend to live in a world where a good portion of what we hear, see and experience is unintelligible to us. And that to me feels more real than if everything was transparent for every reader.” The stream of references, not just to comic books but to films, television shows, role-playing and video games, and endless other nerd fixations are not too obscure to not be recognized for what they are, but just obscure enough that even an accomplished nerd wouldn’t be likely to get them all, and along with the other techniques they work to do exactly what Diaz wanted: make the reader feel like an immigrant in the novel.

⁶ The second Flash, Barry Allen, being capable of travel throughout the comic book multiverse, was killed by the evil Anti-Monitor, in the process thwarting Anti-Monitor’s attack to destroy the Earth. Allen’s nephew, Wally West, formerly Kid Flash of the Teen Titans then became the first sidekick to actually assume the mantle of his mentor.

⁷ Superman fought the mindless unstoppable killing machine Doomsday across half the United States, refusing help from the other Justice League members, whom he knew would be killed by Doomsday. The two battle until both are dead. Try not to let the fact that killing Superman with the intent to resurrect him was really just a ploy to sell comics ruin the drama for you.

While we're here, feeling like immigrants, there's an important point about Caribbean immigrants that is not to be missed, and with which the superhero metaphor works even better than it did for Jerry Siegel. Oscar's story is the story of an immigrant, but he belongs to a different class of immigrant than we usually associate with the American story. As William Deresiewicz says in his review of *Oscar Wao*, "When immigrants who came to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries left their homelands, they left them forever. Family was left behind, and so, for good or ill, was history" (36). But now we have airplanes and cell phones and the Internet, and the past can always find you if you don't find it first. Now immigrants remain trapped between two cultures, and "this is especially true of immigrants from the Caribbean basin, whose lands are so close, and whose status and plans are so often unclear" (Deresiewicz, 36). More than any other kind of immigrant, immigrants from the Caribbean live in two worlds simultaneously. At the end of Mark Waid and Alex Ross' *Kingdom Come*, as the super-powered engage in a battle that could end all human life, the humans respond by dropping a nuke on the battle, intending to kill all metahumans to save themselves. Superman finds himself unable to decide between saving the humans and saving the metahumans, and he tells Billy Batson that only he can choose, because only he has truly lived both the life of a human and the life of a superhero. Oscar and his family, and all Caribbean immigrants live in both worlds in a way that few other American immigrants have. Like Superman, his Kryptonian heritage evidenced by the symbol on his chest, their pasts cannot be left behind.

Speaking of Billy Batson, on page 329 Diaz says Lola's daughter Isis is "Neither

Captain Marvel, nor Billy Batson, but the lightning.” Billy Batson is a young boy, a radio reporter who is chosen by an ancient wizard to be a hero. When Batson utters the wizard’s name, Shazam!, he is transformed by magic lightning into Captain Marvel⁸. In an interview with Celayo and Shook, Diaz says:

I think the joke in the book is about Shazam, constantly Shazam and Isis—these superhero characters are in some ways my vision of the Dominican Republic and the United States, where Billy Batson, the normal guy, suddenly says the word *shazam!* and turns into this superbeing. And in some ways it's basically what happens. Santo Domingo's typical-normal, we think the Third World's commiseration and suffering is normal, and the United States is this superbeing. And so I kept wondering. What the fuck? Where's my role in this? And you find yourself neither. The joke is you're neither Billy Batson or Captain Marvel, you're basically *shazam!*, you're the word, you're that lightning which transforms, that runs back and forth between them and holds them together, and I think part of this narrative was attempting to write the lightning, because I don't think I could've done anything else, though my special position in my life was that. That's what I was. I'll be Billy Batson when I'm in Santo Domingo and look around, and then I go to the United States and you're *shazam!*, but I felt what I really was was that thing which holds these two guys together, that makes their transformation possible. (17)

⁸ It’s essentially a superhero version of *Big*, but without the creepiness of watching a 28-year-old Elizabeth Perkins hit on a 12-year-old kid.

Rather than leaving us with the hope that Isis will be a good little Mary Marvel and save the family from the fukú, Diaz returns to the world of comics to give us a quote from *Watchmen*,⁹ “Nothing ever ends.” Perhaps as long as the de Leons live in a New World with such proximity to their Old World, they will not be able to escape. Or perhaps geography isn’t enough to escape. In comics, a character’s past can follow them across the universe, because they always carry it with them. One of the most noticeable facets of the novel is the silence, the way in which the characters do not discuss the right things – love, the past, the future – with each other in a way that helps them move on from it. Superheroes do this, too. They bury the tragedy of their past, internalizing it constantly, only letting it out when they’re beneath the mask, and even then it’s misplaced and unrecognized for what it is. As in *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, *Kingdom Come*, and even *Justice League Unlimited*, the superpowered beings often cause as many problems as they solve. Their motivations are selfish. Superman doesn’t truly seek to help people, he seeks to be welcomed and appreciated. Batman doesn’t seek to help the citizens of Gotham; he seeks to take revenge on them for killing his parents. Spider-Man’s quest isn’t about helping others; it’s about paying penance for his own mistake.

The many ways, the de Leons act selfishly throughout the novel. They are concerned more with their own happiness than with that of others around them. Oscar’s death, however, is an unselfish act, at least in his mind. He truly believes that he can end the fukú, that he can save his family further harm. Isis, too, represents a turning point. Lola is no longer just looking out for herself, and neither

⁹ The only graphic novel to make *Time’s* Top 100 Novels of All Time.

is Yunior. Both of them now have a hope for the future, a “reason to believe,”¹⁰ and though the future is uncertain, they will face it.

This hope is what Oscar and millions of other nerds have found in comic books for decades, and now Isis embodies it for this family. Diaz says in an interview that, “If you’re looking for language that will help you approach our nigh-unbearable historical experiences you can reach for the narratives of the impossible: sci-fi, horror, fantasy, which might not really want to talk about people of color at all but that takes what we’ve experienced (without knowing it) very seriously indeed” (Danticat). By using this language in this way, with this hope in the face on adversity and uncertainty, Diaz represents themes from the best of sci-fi and fantasy, the “sense of wonder,” and melds them perfectly with a very real and harsh saga, making the book, the author, the characters, and the readers all immigrants in their own way, strangers in a strange land, creatures caught between worlds.

¹⁰ Thanks, Boss.

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