

'Like all emigrants caught between here and there':
Multivoiced Narrative and Reinvention of Memory in
Caramelo and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

by

Cristina Georgiana Popa

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2010

To My Parents

“The light of memory, or rather the light that memory lends to things, is the palest light of all. I am not quite sure whether I am dreaming or remembering, whether I have lived my life or dreamed it. Just as dreams do, memory makes me profoundly aware.”

-Eugen Ionescu

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help and guidance of my adviser, Patricia Yaeger. My conversations with her fueled my exploration of the material and her thoughtful readings of my work helped this thesis come to fruition. She gave me the confidence to find and articulate my own voice in an intimidating critical conversation. I am deeply grateful to have worked with such a remarkable academic and editor.

I would also like to thank Catherine Sanok for going above and beyond her duties as the director of the English Honors program. She was always incredibly generous with her time and often restored my sanity in times of distress. My meetings with her helped solidify the argument and structure of this project.

My conversations with Joshua Miller were fodder for thought and the source of some of the most important secondary literature in the thesis. Michael Byers's class inspired me to tackle this project and his appreciation for contemporary immigrant literature was contagious. I must also extend special thanks to William Ingram, whose Elizabethan English class will always stand out among the many courses I took at the University of Michigan. He is single-handedly responsible for my enrollment in the honors program and has continued to be a source of motivation throughout the years.

I am grateful for the support of my cohort, whose meticulous criticism often organized the chaos inside my head. In particular, I would like to thank Jenny for her sharp critical eye and late-night Gchat conversations, Jared for never ceasing to provide amusement and constantly reminding me of the beauty within the thesis process, and

Mat for being one of the few clear-headed individuals in my life and encouraging me to return to my love of literature in times of distress. Thanks to my roommates, K-LAD, for always cheering me on and patiently listening to my endless complaints.

This endeavor - and so many others - would not have been possible without Wyndam's support and encouragement. My sanity throughout these seven months is a testament to his endless patience and compassion. Thank you for believing in me.

My love for books was fueled at an early age by my grandmother, who taught me to read and appreciate literature through *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Thank you for always seeing the beauty in my writing.

Lastly, I thank my parents for always motivating me to reach the highest standards and for always believing that I could do so. Their strength and resilience has been my greatest inspiration - their love and affection boundless. My academic and otherwise success is a direct result of the values they have instilled in me, and for that I am grateful every day. This thesis is as much a product of their support as it is of my work. Thank you for being my parents, my mentors, and my best friends.

Abstract

The novel, according to M.M. Bakhtin, is inherently heteroglossic, containing multiple voices that represent a variety of socio-linguistic perspectives. Unlike poetry, prose must be analyzed not only formally, but also sociologically, in order to account for its complexity. This thesis uses Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia as a tool for examining the multivoiced narratives in *Caramelo*, by Sandra Cisneros and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Diaz. Both novels chronicle the lives of first-generation Americans who search for voice and identity while simultaneously attempting to integrate history, culture, and family into their lives.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on analyzing the identities of the protagonists and narrators in the two novels. While Lala, the protagonist in *Caramelo*, tells her own story, Yunior--a third-person narrator--tells Oscar's story. Both Lala and Yunior divulge their unreliability in the first pages of their narratives and become increasingly more untrustworthy as their stories progress. They attempt to offset this unreliability by introducing a multitude of outside voices that complete and correct their narratives. The protagonists--Lala and Oscar--constantly search for voice and agency in order to develop their own identities. Like their narrators, they quickly realize that their journeys would be incomplete if they didn't account for their history, culture, and family. This chapter concludes that the narrators need outside voices in order to complete their stories, while the protagonists need the same voices in order to define their own identities.

The second chapter analyzes both Lala and Oscar as characters in multigenerational and multicultural stories. As first-generation Americans with close ties to their motherlands, they constantly shuttle between the two cultures. Trapped, they cannot escape their families and often find themselves falling into familiar and destructive patterns. The voices of the past are simultaneously friend and foe, central to the development of their identities and detrimental to finding their unique voice. This chapter concludes that the ethnic character, as represented through Lala and Oscar, needs a formal and a sociological solution to the abundance of voices in his/her life.

The third chapter reconciles the paradoxical need for multiple voices in ethnic narratives and the detrimental nature of these voices on Lala's and Oscar's identity-formation. The solution to this problem in both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the reinvention of memory as a tool for managing the multivoiced nature of both stories. Lala reinvents memory by recreating elements of the past that most satisfy the needs of her narrative. The identity she ultimately develops is part-past and part-present. In Oscar's case, Yunior reinvents his memory by reducing his life to lessons for future generations, modifying elements and silencing voices of the past in order to service the present.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTERS	
1. 'HUMAN LIVES NEED AND MERIT BEING NARRATED'	10
2. 'DO YOU EVER MISS HAVING A FAMILY?'	32
3. 'HOW I IMAGINE THE STORIES HAPPENED'	52
CONCLUSION	67
WORKS CONSULTED	69

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros writes about her journey from a small house in a Latino-dominated Chicago suburb, to the Iowa writers' workshop, to her dream house in San Antonio, Texas, which looks "just like the houses in Mexico."¹ It is a story of immigration, dreams, remaking of memory, and the dire need to acquire voice and agency.² Cisneros' journey mirrors the structure of this project, which explores first-generation immigrant writing as means for establishing an identity that reconciles family, culture, and history.³ It emphasizes the importance of the reinvention of memory in resolving the conflicts between the numerous voices in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Cisneros's character remembers how, "when she lived at home, the things she looked at scolded her and made her feel sad and depressed", but the things in her new office "are magical and invite her to play. They fill her with light. Her office is the room where she can be quiet and still and listen to the voices inside herself."⁴ Though the voices in her childhood home chastise and depress her, these are the same voices that she later wants to hear in her own space; they help her write the stories that she needs

¹ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003), p. xxvi.

² Like the protagonists and narrators discussed in this thesis, it is important to note that Sandra Cisneros was not an immigrant herself, but rather the child of immigrants. For the purposes of this thesis, she is considered a first-generation immigrant or ethnic writer.

³ For variety's sake, 'first-generation immigrant', 'immigrant', and 'ethnic' writer will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. All terms refer to the children of immigrants, or first-generation Americans.

⁴ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003), p. xii.

to establish her identity. This paradox marks my first argument; the idea that the immigrant narrator is at all times contained by the multiple voices that speak to him/her. These voices, which represent history, family, and cultural memory, are simultaneously friend and foe. While they may hinder the immigrant's quest for identity, they are also integral to his/her success in writing a story that embraces the complexity of the ethnic experience.

Cisneros's relationship with her father exemplifies the discord between the voices in her life. She simultaneously seeks and rejects his approval, and uses writing as a tool for proving herself to him. She says:

On the weekends, if I can sidestep guilt and avoid my father's demands to come home for Sunday dinner, I'm free to stay home and write. I feel like a bad daughter ignoring my father, but I feel worse when I don't write. Either way, I never feel completely happy.⁵

Stuck between two worlds, this halted child is all too common in immigrant literature. Cisneros' heroine feels that she must choose between pleasing her father and writing, though these two alternatives need not be mutually exclusive. She feels free when she writes and caged when she spends time with her family and neglects her craft. The two forces in her life compete with one another: the old, represented by her father and tradition, and the new, represented by her writing and need for independence. The discord between these two voices interferes with her ability to find herself and write about her experiences. The solution to this problem, as seen in *Caramelo* and *The Brief*

⁵ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003), p. xix.

Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, is to acknowledge the multiplicity of voices, attempt to integrate them, and rewrite a unique history that simultaneously acknowledges the root culture and pays tribute to the emergent identity.⁶

The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then, but sometimes three real people would be braided together into one made-up person. Usually when I thought I was creating someone from my imagination, it turned out I was remembering someone I'd forgotten or someone standing so close I couldn't see her at all.⁷

Through this recognition, Cisneros points to another key element of this project--the problem of memory--also painfully evident in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Cisneros's heroine uses real people as the base for her story, combining personalities and creating new ones. This reinvented memory is a combination of the old and the new, the true and the imagined. Like Cisneros, the narrators I will discuss reinvent the past, whether immediate or distant, in their writing. They use this reinvention as the basis for establishing their own agency and identity. This idea is not only crucial to reading *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao*, but also an essential part of understanding the social phenomenon of immigration. Starting anew in another country--particularly America, which is known for its new beginnings--gives the immigrant a new sense of agency that may not have been previously accessible. This agency is often transferred to the offspring of immigrants, who feel much more

⁶ The term 'root culture' refers to the culture of the mother country - the country in which the immigrants were born.

⁷ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003), p. xxii.

empowered than their parents because they are part of two worlds and have the opportunity of moving and choosing between the two. This type of mobility governs Lala's and Oscar's lives, simultaneously adding to and detracting from their ability to find their own identity.

The need for agency, the obligation to history, culture, and family, and the reinvention of memory surface in many contemporary ethnic novels. The element of style that often unites them is the use of multiple voices: physical manifestations of the psychological processes Cisneros discusses in her introduction. The origins of my project started exactly here, with the observation that many of the novels I was reading contained a multitude of voices: family members, friends, and dead relatives among many others. My fascination with this stylistic choice prompted my exploration of the ethnic novel as a multivoiced narrative that strives to acquire agency and reinvent memory in order to create identity. M. M. Bakhtin complicates this idea in his essay "Discourse in the Novel":

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech type (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passions fashion, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purpose of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) – this internal stratification

present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre.⁸

This revolutionary take on the novel defines it as an inherently multivoiced entity, which engages multiple types of language and social phenomena. This multiplicity frames the novel as the perfect medium for conveying not only a diversity of languages, but also a diversity of social struggles and experiences, as Bakhtin insists:

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*rashnorecie*] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized).⁹

The concept of heteroglossia, or the multivoiced novel, is central to this project. By asserting that the novel is inherently heteroglossic, Bakhtin implies that it is also the most appropriate genre for narrating complex experiences, like those of the immigrant or ethnic character. These experiences are multifarious emotionally, socially, and economically, so their complexity cannot be easily conveyed through traditional narrative. Instead, the ethnic narrator turns to what may be called an exaggerated version of heteroglossia: the use of multiple voices that are purposefully ‘othered’ in order to allow for the powerful reinvention of memory and provide the narrator with

⁸ M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 484.

⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 485.

the authority and agency necessary to tell what is often a multicultural and multigenerational story.

As Deborah Shiffrin argues, “stories are resources not just for the development and presentation of a self as a psychological entity, but as someone located within a social and cultural world.”¹⁰ The immigrant stories explored in this thesis do not only focus on the individual ethnic characters, but on the context that define them. This context speaks to the complexity of their experiences and their precarious place between the root culture and the adoptive culture. This ‘inbetweenness’ eventually leads to a confusion of identity due to the abundance of voices that prove difficult to reconcile.

The two novels discussed in this thesis are part of a new movement of immigrant literature, written by Third World authors. As Gilbert Muller argues in the book *New Strangers in Paradise*, this new wave of literature finds new and diverse modes of expression, “one that modifies heroic or canonical myths stressing America’s glorious past and replaces these myths with a reconstituted epic that delineates the fragmentation of narrational life as people move from other countries and continents to the United States.”¹¹ One of these innovative modes of expression is the reinvention of memory, which Lala and Yunion both use to reconcile the voices they have invited into the conversation. This project reads the reinvention of memory as a key component of ethnic literature.

¹⁰ Deborah Schiffrin, “Narrative as Self-Portrait: Sociolinguistic Constructions of Identity,” *Language in Society* 25 (1996), p. 169.

¹¹ Gilbert Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 4

The first chapter of this thesis explores the identities of the protagonists and the narrators in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and emphasizes their need for voice and agency. It centers on the concept that narrative is central to constructing one's personal identity. As Maureen Whitebrook argues in *Identity, Narrative, and Politics*:

Identity is a matter of telling stories –hence narrative identity... The construction of narrative identity is a collective act, involving tellers and listeners... I suggest that identity is, primarily, a matter of the stories persons tell others about themselves, plus the stories others tell about those persons and/or other stories in which those persons are included. Defining identity in terms of narrative rests on claims about the naturalness of storytelling, and hence the construction of identity through stories.¹²

As characters, both Lala and Oscar search for voice and agency through the creation of narrative identity. The narrators of their stories face similar issues as they strive to establish their reliability. Both parties are silenced by their inability to create complete narratives, so they look to 'othered' voices that can fill in the gaps of their knowledge. The first chapter concludes that both protagonists and narrators need multiple voices to accomplish their individual goals and fulfill their roles.

The second chapter analyzes Lala and Oscar as characters in multicultural and multigenerational stories, unable to find their place among the multitude of voices in

¹² Maureen Whitebrook, *Identity, Narrative, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

their lives. According to Bridget Kevane, this “sense of displacement” is common among Latinos:

...A hybrid bilingual, bicultural individual who is sharing two worlds, straddling the fence, belonging neither here nor there, belonging both here and there, being from two worlds, living in the borderlands, living on the hyphen...¹³

Although both Lala and Oscar float between spaces in search of an identity, their stories are different in the fluidity with which they move and the level at which they allow the voices in their lives to converse with one another. In this chapter, I distinguish between *Caramelo* as dialogic heteroglossia and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as narratorial heteroglossia. While the former contains voices that directly interact and converse with one another, the latter is compartmentalized by its narrator, its voices isolated from one another. The second chapter concludes that ethnic characters, as represented through Lala and Oscar, need a formal and sociological solution to the abundance of voices in their lives.

The third chapter reconciles the paradoxical need for multiple voices and the detrimental nature of these voices on both Lala’s and Oscar’s identity-formation. This chapter discusses the reinvention of memory in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as the solution to the problems presented in the first two chapters. As A.P. Kerby suggests in his book:

Memories are not what they are because they somehow mirror a pre-given and meaningful reality. Recollection, like perception, involves a considerable degree

¹³ Bridget Kevane, *Latino Literature in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 9.

of interpretation; this is especially apparent in traditional psychoanalytic practice where the meaning of what is recollected may go through various stages of interpretation.¹⁴

This reinvention of memory in both novels is analyzed as a necessary tool for the ethnic narrator, one that allows him/her to create a unique identity while simultaneously paying tribute to the past.

¹⁴Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 27.

'HUMAN LIVES NEED AND MERIT BEING NARRATED'¹⁵

The importance of narrative, both as literary form and as a crucial element of identity-formation, has been thoroughly explored by critics and philosophers.¹⁶ As A.P. Kerby articulates in the book *Narrative and the Self*:

Narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experiences, and ultimately of ourselves. Narrative emplotment appears to yield a form of understanding of human experience, both individual and collective, that is not amenable to other forms of exposition or analysis.¹⁷

The first step in our analysis of *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is to identify both narratives as tools for defining and understanding the self. Lala's and Oscar's lives are filtered by their narrators and transformed into stories of identity-formation. In order to understand this process, we must establish the rules of truth and fiction in both novels, explore the identity of the protagonists and narrators, and move toward an understanding of the way these qualities are reflected in their form and structure.

The epigraph to *Caramelo* sets the tone for the story that is about to follow: "Tell me a story, even if it's a lie". This simple sentence reads like a request and sets up

¹⁵ The title of this chapter comes from Paul Ricoeur, who is cited in Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 53.

¹⁶ Anna DeFina, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003). Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001).

¹⁷ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 3.

storytelling as a kind of crossbreed between truth and reality. The disclaimer that emphasizes the inherent existence of lies within stories follows:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of strings, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdonenme* [forgive me]. To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento* [pure story]. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres Mi Vida, Sueno Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Solo Tu* [You are my life, I dream with you my love, I yearn for you, only you].¹⁸

The disclaimer spans the major themes within *Caramelo*--Lala's search for identity, her need to reconcile history, culture, and family, and the reinvention of memory--so we will return to it throughout our analysis. But first, we will focus on its implications for establishing Lala's identity as a narrator. Though at this point we know very little about her background, we immediately question her reliability as she admits that she comes from a tradition of "healthy lies" and a family who embellishes and reinvents in order to create stories. Her apology for accidentally stumbling upon the truth implies that her intention is not to write the truth; rather, the truth is a byproduct of her storytelling. As a narrator, Lala seems to value the journey more than the destination, the questions

¹⁸ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003). All references, hereafter given parenthetically, are to (Cisneros).

more than the answers. She accepts the gaps in her knowledge and confesses that she invents in order to fill those gaps.

While the disclaimer speaks to Lala's personal attitude toward truth, it also positions her within a tradition of lies--a practice of storytelling that does not necessarily belong to her. Though Lala's language clearly indicates that her weaving together of lies and truth is a conscious and deliberate choice, the mention of family tradition seems to suggest that there are greater forces at play, practices that Lala either cannot or does not want to escape. Her narrative is not only a product of her own experiences and desires, but also a product of a well-established family tradition. This analysis casts further doubt on Lala's credibility by taking away some of her narrative powers and positioning her as a passive participant in a meta-narrative whose rules she must obey.¹⁹

The prologue to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* functions in much of the same way as the epigraph and disclaimer do for *Caramelo*: both are attempts to position the protagonist of the story within a larger cultural and familial context. As with the disclaimer to *Caramelo*, the prologue addresses most major themes of the novel and establishes the narrator (Yunior) as a curious teller of Oscar's story. After he introduces the concept of *fuku*, a "curse or doom of some kind" that follows families for generations, Yunior says:

I'm not entirely sure Oscar would have like this designation. *Fuku* story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we

¹⁹ I use the term 'meta-narrative' to define the kind of narrative that attempts to integrate the self, history, culture, and family.

were all living in. He'd ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fuku?²⁰

Yunior brands Oscar's story a *fuku* from the get-go. His indecisive language and his confession that Oscar may not have agreed with the way Yunior tells his story immediately question his ability to offer a true portrayal of Oscar's life. As we will see, passivity and inaction define Oscar's life. When Yunior looks back on his tragic story, he uses conditional verbs that imply that Oscar has either passed away or disappeared, and is thus unable to correct inaccuracies and inconsistencies in his narrative. Since Oscar is not present to tell his own story, Yunior's prologue indicates that he does not only lack control over his life, but also ultimately lacks control over the way his story is told. The beginning of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes Yunior as an unreliable narrator and Oscar as a protagonist with limited agency.

Though structurally *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are similar in their attempt to tell multicultural and multigenerational stories that center on one protagonist, the differences between the positions of the two narrators create disparities between the two stories. Lala tells her story and the story of the Reyes family from her own perspective. Though the middle section of the book (Part II) is technically told from the Awful Grandmother's perspective, Lala filters this part as much as all the others. As a narrator, she needs outside voices to complete her gaps in knowledge, but also holds

²⁰ Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), p.6. All references, hereafter given parenthetically, are to (Diaz).

immense power over these voices because she adds her own perspective to them. She reveals this aspect of the narrative in one of her disagreements with the Awful Grandmother, when she says:

AG (Awful Grandmother): Ceyala, why are you so cruel with me? You love to make me suffer. You enjoy mortifying me, isn't that so? Is that why you insist on showing everyone this... dirt, but refuse me one little love scene?

Lala: For crying out loud, Grandmother. If you can't let me do my job and tell this story without your constant interruptions...

AG: All I wanted was a little understanding, but I see I was asking for too much.

Lala: Just trust me, will you? Let me go on with the story without your comments. (Cisneros 172)

The dialogue between Lala and the Awful Grandmother clearly shows a discrepancy between the stories they each want to tell. Even though the grandmother asks for a love scene, Lala deliberately ignores this request, as well as her attempts to correct the narrative, and begs her to let her do "her job". This passage shows Lala's strong narrator authority because it reveals her ability to control the flow of information in the story that she is telling. Paradoxically, like the disclaimer, it also deducts from her authority because it continues to question her reliability as a truthful storyteller. In Part I of *Caramelo*, Lala is a first-person narrator who speaks about her own experiences as part of the Reyes family. In Part II, she becomes an omniscient narrator who tells the multigenerational story of the Reyes family, complete with inner thoughts and monologues--things she could not possibly know. Even when the spirit of the Awful

Grandmother corrects her story, some elements remain implausible because neither Lala nor the Awful Grandmother could have had access to the information. The source of many of the stories in Part II remains unknown, so the information also remains under scrutiny. In Part III of the novel, Lala reverts back to the first-person narrator, though this time she tries to integrate outside voices into her narrative. As before, she filters these voices through her own prism and gets the last word at the end of the story.

In stark contrast to *Caramelo*, two third-person narrators--Yunior (Oscar's friend and college roommate) and Lola (Oscar's sister)--tell Oscar's story. Even though Oscar is the protagonist of the book, he is not the narrator because, as we find out in the last few pages, he is assassinated in the Dominican Republic. The main narrator is Yunior, with Lola supplementing the parts of Oscar's life that Yunior could not have had access to (mostly personal family moments and his mother's battle with cancer). As mentioned previously, Yunior does not seem to be entirely sure of whether or not Oscar would want his life to be described as a *fuku* story. His motivation for writing Oscar's story is questionable because, unlike the other voices in the narrative (Lola and Oscar's mother), he interacts with Oscar for a comparatively limited portion of his short life. Still in love with Lola, who is married and has a daughter, Yunior reveals his motivation for writing Oscar's story in the last pages of the novel:²¹

...on a string around [Lola's daughter's] neck: three azabaches: the one that

Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was

²¹ Yunior and Lola have a very tumultuous romantic relationship throughout *Oscar Wao*. In the last pages, Yunior implies that he is still in love with Lola even though she is married and has a daughter.

given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary... One day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time, she will hear the word *fuku*... If she's her family's daughter –as I suspect she is- one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers. Not now, but soon. One day when I'm least expecting, there will be a knock at my door... she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. (Diaz 329-331)

Yunior's hope that Lola's daughter (Isis) will one day visit him, wanting to find out more about Oscar's life, is his incentive for writing a detailed story of Oscar's life. Yunior hopes that Isis will ultimately learn from Oscar's story and break the vicious cycle of *fuku* that has surrounded Oscar's family for many generations. The three azabaches²² that she wears represent the past that she inherits, a past that Yunior wants to turn into a lesson, not a foreshadowing of Isis's future. Without the lessons of Oscar's life, Yunior seems to believe that she is bound to be haunted by the same *fuku* and make the same mistakes that destroyed her ancestors for generations. Through his storytelling, Yunior hopes that she will learn something from Oscar's life, start asking questions, and finally escape the doom that inevitably waits for her. His narrative, then, can be read as a lesson for a young, impressionable girl. Oscar's story becomes a cautionary tale and Yunior's intent to make it into a cautionary tale—even if it is not—influences not only the way the story is told, but also the elements of Oscar's life that he chooses to include in the story. Consequently, like Lala, Yunior's reliability as a narrator

²² In Latin America, azabache bracelets are meant to protect from the Evil Eye, or from curses like the *fuku*.

is questioned because his motives for writing Oscar's story bias the content and tone of his narrative.

We further question Yuniór's reliability as a narrator when he attempt to give us glimpses of Oscar's private moments or internal monologues, even when we know it is impossible for him to have this information. In one instance, Yuniór talks about Oscar's final moments:

He told them what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world...He told them about Ybon and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they'd started to dream the same dreams and say the same words. (Diaz 321)

He does not only attempt to describe Oscar's death, but also the complexity of his emotional experiences as he is being killed. His mention of a "great love" emphasizes the tragedy of his assassination, as well as the heartbreak of his relationship with Ybon. Yuniór's position as a non-omniscient, third person narrator does not permit him to know the details of Oscar's last minutes, yet he still describes them in detail in the last pages of the novel. Though the text provides little evidence of Oscar's optimism, Yuniór's description of his last moments sounds like a fairytale; an idealized version of what could have happened in the canefields. Like Lala, he completes gaps in knowledge by inventing, fully aware of the fact that Oscar may not have approved of these inventions. In this case, Yuniór takes on Oscar's voice to complete the story that he was unable to hear from Oscar himself.

Oscar's story, like Lala's, is part truth and part fiction. Though Yuniór does not explicitly admit that he invents or embellishes parts of Oscar's story, this is implied in his position as a third-person narrator and his zealous descriptions of Oscar's private moments. The second main voice, Lola, contributes to the narrative by describing experiences that she and Oscar shared, so her narrative is comparatively more accurate and reliable. Nonetheless, Yuniór controls most of the narrative, as well as the passages that should speak most candidly to Oscar's personality and internal experiences. Unlike Oscar, Lala has full control over the way she tells her own story and outright admits she invents parts of her narrative. She has the advantage of the first-person narrator who is able to not only portray her own experiences, but also reinvent the larger meta-narrative of her family's history.

The key to analyzing the significance of the differences in choice of narrator between *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* lies in each narrator's motivation for telling the story. In turn, this motivation is a reflection of the narrators' and protagonists' needs, as well as the needs of the storyline itself. For Lala, storytelling is a very important cultural element that drives her narrative. For Yuniór, writing Oscar's story is important for establishing his legacy and creating a cautionary tale for Isis. In both cases, they write their stories in order to give their protagonists a voice, an established life narrative that traces their story as well as their family's history. Though both stories seem to have the same general purpose, the implications of the narrators' identities create two distinct categories for voice and agency. While Lala's narrative moves toward establishing her own voice and identity, Oscar's story gives

him a voice from beyond the grave. Lala writes her story in order to trace patterns within her family and ultimately find herself in a meta-narrative. Oscar, who is dead and cannot write his own story, depends on Yuniors to record his legacy, give him a voice, and create meaning out of a series of tragic events.

Now that we have addressed the narrators of the two novels, we must move on to exploring the identities of the protagonists. The most basic communality between the protagonists in *Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* is their status as first-generation Americans; they are both foreign by definition. In both Oscar's and Lala's case, their roots are essential parts of their identities, effectively making them half American, half ethnic. This 'inbetweenness' does not allow them to fully integrate in either community and sends them on a continuous quest for self-authentication. Berndt Ostendorf articulates this phenomenon in his discussion of the definition of immigrant/ethnic literature:

On an abstract level immigrant/ethnic literature repeats the quest for self-determination and self-authentication which characterized the growth of an American literary identity *vis-à-vis* British dominance... The pregeneric myth (N. Frye) of immigrant ethnic/literature is struggle, strain and combat in the quest for self-determination.²³

Both Lala and Oscar are ethnic characters who, according to Ostendorf, embark on a quest toward self-determination and self-authentication. Ostendorf's theory introduces the idea of ethnic writing as a means for obtaining agency, an agency that has been reduced or completely eliminated by the ethnic status. The clash that

²³Berndt Ostendorf, "Literary Acculturation: What Makes Ethnic Literature 'Ethnic'," *Callaloo* 25 (1985): 578.

Ostendorf talks about results from the conflict between the old and new culture--in this case, the Dominican or Mexican and the American. The root culture takes a secondary role once it becomes more important for the character to integrate into the adopted culture, in an attempt to fully belong to the new society. This inherent rejection of the root culture detracts from his/her agency. The lack of choice leaves a void in his/her identity, one that only can be filled by writing his/her story. Both Lala and Oscar are driven by their need to create a tangible statement of voice, identity, and agency. As ethnic characters, they crave to find their place between cultures and generations. This need for a tangible niche is the driving force for both protagonists.

Part I of *Caramelo* represents Lala's move toward establishing an individual voice and identity. While it certainly demarcates her as an independent character, it also pinpoints the major reasons why she needs to make such a conscious effort to establish her authority. Although it reads as Lala's attempt to piece together the story of her childhood, Part I paradoxically opens with her absence from an important family photograph. Lala's narrative begins with, "we're all little in the photograph above Father's bed." (Cisneros 3) The "we" in the sentence, along with the ensuing vivid descriptions of all the family members, imply Lala's presence at the event that she describes. It also places her insider the "we", not outside. However, as she continues to talk about the portrait taken in Acapulco, she says, "I'm not here. They've forgotten about me...No one notices I'm off by myself building sand houses." (Cisneros 4) The "we" used in the beginning of the story turns into an "I". This "I" (Lala) exists outside her family: an independent entity that builds sand houses by herself. The grammar

usage further complicates the complexity of Lala's realization. Instead of saying, "I was not there", she says, "I am not here", implying not only a past, but also a present feeling of being an outsider. This outsider status does not seem to be self-inflicted, but rather a product of her family's forgetfulness. The blame, so to speak, is placed on them, because it is they who have forgotten her. She is not in the portrait because they have excluded her, not because she wanted to exclude herself. To make matters worse, they only notice this transgression when she asks, "When was this taken? Where?" (Cisneros 4) The beginning of the novel paints Lala as a little girl whose family has overlooked her. Though she is a separate entity whose independence shines through her ability to build sand castles by herself while her family is engrossed in having their portrait taken, she still lacks the agency and power to make her voice heard. She is silenced, but learns to deal with this in the most natural way, by playing. Her coping mechanism is a child's coping mechanism, though her challenges speak to a much more complex aspect of the quest for self-authentication.

This pattern continues as Lala attempts to tell stories that involve communal experiences, often shared by most other members of her family. Every time she attempts to weave these stories into her own narrative, she is rejected or overlooked by an outside voice just as she was overlooked when they were taking their family portrait. When Lala tries to describe a drive through the Sierra Madre, her mother argues that she cannot recount a true version of their adventure, but can only "remember the stories somebody told [her]." (Cisneros 19) Here, the Mother sets up a very powerful and directly contradictory dichotomy between Lala's version of events and the *real* version

of events (this distinction is important to note for our future discussion of the reinvention of memory). The separation between the 'real' and the 'personal' parallels the differences between the family's collective experience and Lala's personal experience; the collective experience seems to be 'real' while Lala's does not. The implication that Lala's version of events may not be objective is raised early on in the narrative and reiterates the fact that Part I, told only from Lala's perspective, is her opportunity to tell *her* story. The collective, objective, 'real' version of events doesn't matter, it is Lala's that we must listen to because her story is being told. As Ostarhan argues, Lala "is caught between her own way and the society's expectations from her, being a Chicana girl. To overcome this conflict the first requirement of agency and identity is the act of writing her own story".²⁴ This part of the narrative gives Lala some of the agency she needs to find and establish her own voice in order to tell the story of her family's saga.

Like all journeys of self-discovery, Lala's stories in Part I are almost exclusively self-centered. Though she tries to give an overview of the family, Lala does not yet give them their own voices. She depicts Aunty's home "like a wedding cake, like Marie Antoinette" (Cisneros 13) and says that Uncle Baby and Aunty Ninfa "live like movie stars" (Cisneros 14). These images, clearly described from a child's point of view, are not meant to be entirely credible. They return to the idea that Lala is not reliable as a character or as a narrator. The descriptions are not means to paint a portrait of the Reyes family, but a portrait of Lala through the way she sees her own family. As she

²⁴ Esra Satiyanci Oztarhan, "Rememory and the Challenges of Histories in Cisneros' *Caramelo*," *Aegean Journal of English and American Studies* 13 (2004): 82.

speaks about the pungent odors that imbue her memory, her father's fight to buy her an authentic *rebozo*, her dislike of *mole*, and her traumatic singing experience at her grandparents' anniversary party, it is clear that she is only concerned with painting a picture of her own experiences and establishing some kind of identity for herself. She does not attempt to offer the adults' version of the events she describes, nor does she try to hide the fact that her version of history may not be entirely complete. As a very mature child, she recognizes that her memories are fragmented at best, leaving room for others to complete them throughout the rest of the narrative. By implicitly recognizing her shortcomings, Lala paradoxically strengthens her narratorial reliability because she does pretend to be what she is not: omniscient when her version of events is limited, or an adult when her stories are clearly told from a child's perspective.

The best example of Lala's limited ability to paint a comprehensive picture of her past is her fragmented description of the fight between her mother and father in Acapulco. As she laments the loss of a flower, Lala remembers that her mother "started [laughing]. Hysterically. Wildly. Like a witch who has swallowed a baby." (Cisneros 82) Her language is clearly that of a child whose imagination clouds the memories of her childhood and make them seem as if they belonged in a book of fairytales. Since Lala gives no explanation for her mother's reaction, the lines seem entirely out of context.²⁵ A result of the single-perspective story, the lack of cause and effect in this progression of events is almost inevitable: there is no way for her to know why the Mother becomes so angry with the Father. The Mother's reaction is not directly connected to any major

²⁵ The 'reaction' refers to the mother's realization that her husband has another child and her subsequent episode of fury.

event in previous chapters, so her bout of anger and hysteria seems excessive and misdirected. Regardless, Lala continues to describe her memory of the event and recalls the dialogue between her parents, the Grandmother's reaction to this dialogue, as well as her personal internal struggle in trying to understand what is happening. As the Mother forces the Father to choose between her and the Grandmother, Part I of *Caramelo* ends with Lala saying, "Then Father does something he's never done in his life. Not before, nor since" (Cisneros 86). Lala's self-identifying narrative ends with an incomplete event--an important memory of Lala's childhood left unanswered. Though we can suppose, perhaps even predict, the Father's decision, it is important to note that Lala's memory of the event is incomplete. She does not have any knowledge of her parents' internal struggles, nor does she fully understand what is happening at the moment. She cannot remember the full episode because she never understood it in the first place. As a little girl, her perspective is limited by her age and by the information others are willing to share with her. Part I, dedicated to Lala's identity as an individual separate from her family, cleverly ends with Lala's inability to properly describe memories of her childhood. Though she does her best to describe externalisms, like her mother's extensive use of profanities, Lala finds it impossible to get to the root of the problem. Her own knowledge of the situation is limited and this limitation acts as a barrier to Lala's coming to terms with the complex forces in her life.

The problem identified in Part I of *Caramelo* introduces the need for multiple voices because, without these voices, Lala's narrative remains incomplete and her journey to self-authentication stops short. Though Lala tries to create a clear

separation between her, her family, and her culture in Part I, this presents several problems and results in a failed attempt to construct a well-rounded identity. The main problem, memory, is not resolved because Lala's narrative begs for closure and external perspectives that might complete it. Nonetheless, her agency and voice as a narrator is well established through her recognitions of her own shortcomings and through the brave inclusion of the disclaimer. She focuses on what is important to her and leaves the rest for others to complete.

The prologue to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* offers a simple reason for why Oscar needs agency in his own story. By introducing the concept of *fuku* (definition to follow), Yunior implies that those touched by this curse do not have control over their own lives; that they are governed by an almost supernatural power.

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fuku americanus*, or more colloquially, *fuku* – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World.” (Diaz 1)

The opening paragraph sets the tone and context for Oscar's life, which is in turn associated with entrapment and slavery. Much like the lives of those who first came from Africa and brought the *fuku* with them, Oscar's story seems doomed before it even begins. Like those on the ship, he leaves one world and enters another, bringing with

him “screams” that are analogous to voices and stories, the kind of complex cultural and historical baggage that contributes to his complicated identity.

As Yunior begins to tell Oscar’s story, he is not only silenced by the *fuku* that haunts his life and by his inevitable destiny, but also by his status as an outsider within his own community:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about – he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him). (Diaz 11)

Oscar’s story begins with a statement of something he is *not*, a role that he does not fulfill. He is named a “hero” in the beginning, though his qualities are less than heroic. According to Yunior, Oscar’s failure to live up to his Dominican identity is his most defining characteristic.²⁶ He does not begin by talking about Oscar’s accomplishments, but by pointing out his shortcomings. One of Oscar’s main problems, here and throughout the rest of his life, is his inability to attract women. Yunior associates this failure with his un-Dominican characteristics, heavily emphasizing Oscar’s body issues throughout the book. He describes him as “the fat lonely nerdy kid” (Diaz 19) who resorts to reading comic books and science fiction novels in order to compensate for his lack of friends and, most importantly, girlfriends. As Oscar’s story progresses, he is slowly emasculated simply because he continues to fail to embody the Dominican

²⁶ The narrator of most sections on Oscar is Yunior, his sister’s boyfriend, though we do not find this out until later on in the novel. For our purposes, however, he will be referred to as Yunior.

stereotype of the macho “playboy.” The Dominican community that is supposed to embrace and support him ostracizes, feminizes, and constantly excludes him.

Oscar’s failure to find love is not entirely attributed to his undesirable characteristics, but also to his family’s propensity for making poor romantic choices. As Yunior points out, “Every Dominican family has stories about crazy loves, about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar’s family was no different” (Diaz 45). A multigenerational pattern is revealed when we find out that his mother, Beli, fell in love with one of Trujillo’s gangsters, got impregnated by him, and ultimately lost the child when she was savagely beaten in the canefields because she would not keep her mouth shut.²⁷ Lola--Oscar’s sister and one of the narrators of his family’s story--dates a series of worthless boys, including Yunior, but eventually marries at the end of the novel and has a daughter. As a member of their family, Oscar seems to have no choice but to follow in the pattern that his mother and sister have established. This pattern cements Oscar’s lack of voice and agency and further emphasizes the need for Yunior to tell his story.

Even as Oscar goes off to college and tries to create a new image for himself, he finds himself stuck between two worlds, unable to escape his Dominican past and unable to fit into the American 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

²⁷ Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molena ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1960. The Trujillo era is known as one of the bloodiest in Dominican history.

move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again. But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. (Diaz 49)

Oscar is treated inhumanly by the white students because he looks different. He is excluded solely based on his looks, a predetermined genetic characteristic that he cannot change. The Dominican students, however, exclude him because they do not consider him a "true" Dominican. As previously discussed, Oscar does not fit the physical or the personality profile of a "true" Dominican, a stigma that he is unable to escape even when he goes off to college. Though Oscar tries to make a name for himself and fit into the community, his *fuku* is still there to haunt him. No matter what he says or does, he cannot find his place in the new world. Like Lala, *Caramelo's* narrator, he is stuck between two worlds, unable to enter either. It is crucial to realize that Oscar's inability to fit in is framed as nothing he can help, but rather as a consequence of the *fuku* that haunts him, his family's past, and the genetic material that predisposes him to obesity.

The despair of Oscar's destiny becomes painfully obvious when he is unable to pull himself out of depression as he returns home from college:

According to Yuniur, "He saw himself falling through the air. He knew what he was turning into. He was turning into the worst kind of human on the planet: an old bitter dork...He didn't want this future but he couldn't see how it could be avoided, couldn't figure his way out of it. *Fuku*. (Diaz 268)

The fatalistic language that Yuniur uses to describe Oscar's state of mind is crucial to our understanding of Oscar's death at the end of the novel. According to Oscar's

narrator, Oscar sees the doom of the *fuku* coming for him but he cannot do anything to stop it. He sees his grim future but he does not know how to avoid it. To release this tension, Oscar decides to travel to Santo Domingo for the summer. Though he has not done this in the past and “so abrupt a change in policy was this that even Lola quizzed him about it” ... Oscar “shrugged. I guess I want to try something new.” (Diaz 272)

Ironically, Oscar’s first act of agency is also the first event in a series that ends with his tragic death. Oscar moves from stasis to action; he starts losing weight and goes to the Dominican Republic in order to escape the despairing cycle that he sees himself in. He gives himself voice and agency by making others notice him: his decisions assert his personality and his weight loss attracts attention. For a brief period of time, he is the acting agent in his own story. He no longer lets things happen to him, but rather acts on them. In the Dominican Republic, Oscar falls in love with the police captain’s girlfriend. Though he is perfectly aware of this dangerous affiliation and gets badly beaten by the captain’s subordinates, Oscar acts on his need to be with the woman he loves and persists in his quest to gain her love. As he is taken to the canefields for the first time, we read Oscar’s rare perspective:

...this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he’d been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than *déjà vu*, but before he could focus on it the moment slipped away, drowned by his fear, and then the two men told him to stop and turn around. (Diaz 298)

Strangely enough, this is the moment when Oscar feels most comfortable and most familiar in his surroundings. Though he clearly knows that his minutes are numbered,

the “strange familiar feeling” is comforting to him. He is at peace because being beaten in the canefields for love is his destiny, his *fuku*. Oscar’s passive acceptance as he meets his destiny begs for a voice that will tell his story and make sense of his tragic ending. It is also a recognition that Yuniór (who acts as Oscar’s voice) cannot create a complete narrative without summoning additional voices, whether directly or indirectly. Like Lala, he needs multiple voices in order to create the cautionary tale of Oscar’s life.

As evidenced throughout this chapter, the narrators in both novels emerge as unreliably and incomplete. Their positions do not allow them to narrate complete stories, so they must imagine and reinvent, as well as borrow outside voices to complete their narratives. Both protagonists, Lala and Oscar, are silenced by their status in the world they live in, so they also need outside voices to gain voice and agency. They both emerge as characters who need to position themselves into a larger web of complex relationships in order to find their own niche and identity. They are stuck between cultures and generations, unable to enter either, so they look to the past to find the answers they need for the present. They revert to ‘othered’ voices in order to reach an understanding of their own selves.

'DO YOU EVER MISS HAVING A FAMILY?'²⁸

In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin argues that:

...all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values...As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia.²⁹

According to Bakhtin, each language or voice within the novel represents a particular and specific point of view. Identifying these voices means identifying different points of view that interact with one another and evolve within the novel's languagescape. The multitude of voices in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, like those described by Bakhtin, represent unique viewpoints that define Lala's and Oscar's identities. For the purposes of this chapter, I will separate these viewpoints into two categories: cultural and familial. Each of the novels contains at least two cultural voices: the voice of the adoptive country (America) and the voice of the mother country (Mexico or the Dominican Republic), represented by auxiliary characters. Likewise, they contain familial voices from both past and present. These voices, which vary in frequency between the two novels, set up Lala and Oscar as characters in multicultural and multigenerational stories. As Bakhtin suggests, they interact with one another

²⁸ Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), p. 133.

²⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 503.

within the environment of the novel to create an ongoing discourse that shapes the identity of the protagonist.

Bakhtin suggests that the heteroglossic novel is ideal for exploring complex social and psychological experiences. His theory allows us to see multivocal narratives as perfect frames for discussing the intricacies of the ethnic experience by focusing not solely on the individual, but also on the web of historical, cultural, and familial relationships that will be discussed throughout this chapter. As Bakhtin points out, the voices within any novel dialogue with one another and take on real life within the text. Eventually, they integrate to form a homogeneous narration while simultaneously staying true to their own nature. Bakhtin's argument that all novels are inherently multivocal begs the question of why heteroglossia is particularly important in our discussion of the ethnic novel. What makes it and its voices special, what sets it apart from any other novel? This chapter argues that the voices in *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao* are purposefully 'othered', represented by auxiliary characters that engage in active discourse throughout the novel. This stylistic choice is necessary for addressing the complexity of Lala and Oscar as characters within the stories we are discussing. However, though these types of voices are present in both novels, the differences in narrative strategies between the two stories point to two different types of heteroglossic narration: one dialogical and the other narratorial. While the voices in *Caramelo* are in constant conversation with one another (dialogical), the voices in *Oscar Wao* are all filtered by the same narrator (narratorial). Ethnic novels, I argue, depend on these

voices to explain the complexity of the ethnic/immigrant experience. The voices are clearly demarcated and represented by different people, cultures, and time points.

In the book *Trailing Clouds*, David Cowart identifies ten key features of immigrant literature, which I will argue equally apply to our discussion of first-generation immigrant (ethnic) writing.³⁰ While assigning stringent characteristics to literary genres is often insular and unproductive, using these criteria to illuminate *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is crucial in our understanding of the ethnic novel as a multi-voiced, multi-perspective novel. In one of these categories, Cowart identifies the battling cultural and psychological forces within ethnic literature when he argues that “immigrants struggle with a sense of psychological and cultural doubleness (point of view often shifts: the same character can be both narrator and object of third-person narration, teller and told)”.³¹ The doubleness that Cowart identifies marks the first part of this chapter’s argument – it places Lala and Oscar as characters in multicultural stories. The shift in perspective between teller and told clearly demarcates their roles as characters, while the shift in point of view shows the psychological doubleness and struggle that mark both their lives.

The psychological and cultural doubleness that requires multiple points of view in *Caramelo* is, according to Gilbert Muller, especially prominent in Chicano fiction:

³⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, ‘first-generation immigrant writing’ and ‘ethnic writing’ will be used interchangeably. Both Lala and Oscar are first-generation Americans, but their experiences are closely tied to immigrant experiences as a result of their close ties to their respective homelands.

³¹ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 2.

Basic to the experience of immigrant and migrant groups comprising the canon of contemporary American fiction is a deeply rooted sense of duality. Nowhere is this phenomenon of duality –of the self divided physically and culturally, of being both a part of the American experience and yet differentiated from it- more apparent than in the lives of those Mexican Americans who appear in the distinctive body of Chicano fiction.³²

Although trying to pinpoint a clean-cut explanation of the Mexican American ‘in-betweenness’ would be futile, I would like to suggest a few possibilities. The first, applicable to all Chicano fiction, is the geographic proximity of the homeland (Mexico) to the adoptive country. Lala’s narrative opens with her family’s yearly journey to Mexico City and her cross-cultural experiences as the travels to her grandparents’ house. This journey, though by no means short, is customary for her family and shows their burgeoning ties to Mexico, but also their ease of mobility between the two countries and cultures. They move fluidly between the two spaces, and it is this fluidity that leads to a second explanation of Lala’s doubleness. The murky borders that develop between Mexico and the US exacerbate the cultural ‘inbetweenness’ that Cowart suggests because it makes it nearly impossible for Lala to develop a stable identity. The confusion created by being ‘the other’ in a foreign country is aggravated by the return to the old country and the constant ties that do not allow for proper assimilation.

³² Gilbert Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 60.

Lala masterfully describes the problematic nature of border-crossing between the US and Mexico as she uses two different languages and modes of expression to signify the striking difference between the two cultures:

As soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. *Toc*, says the light switch in this country, at home it says *click*. *Honk*, say the cars at home, here they say *tan-tan-tan*. The *scrip-scrape-scrip* of high heels across *salttillo* floor tiles. The angry lion growl of the corrugated curtains when the shopkeepers roll them open each morning and the lazy lion roar at night when they pull them shut. (Cisneros 17)

Basic sounds, like those made by cars and telephones, are different in Lala's two languages. As readers, we are aware that light switches make the same sounds in every country, though they are explained differently, so the demarcations that Lala creates are indicative of the cultural and psychological doubleness that plagues her throughout the novel. The stark differences that emerge as soon as she crosses the border illustrate one of Lala's main problems as an ethnic character and narrator: she feels torn between the Mexican and American culture and switches abruptly from one to the other, unable to find reconciliatory grounds. Lala creates artificial categories that are based on different languages in an attempt to separate two distinct parts of her identity, making them easier to parse. Here, the two cultural voices that comprise her identity are set up as opposing forces that interfere with one another.

The fragmentation that occurs in the border-crossing episode reappears throughout Lala's story. Outsiders often interrupt her narration; they either speak

through dialogue or, in the Awful Grandmother's case, as a spirit that seeks to complete and correct Lala's story. Lala does not attempt to filter this dialogue, but lets it take its course even when it interrupts her own train of thought:

Curl myself into a question mark and pull the blankets over my head. I try not to think, but the things I try not to think about keep bobbing to the surface like drowned people... A river roaring in my brain. Muddy water sweeping everything along.

-She says she's not hungry. Can you imagine? She's always been finicky, that one. If you ask me, Inocencio's to blame.

-Maybe she's suffering a fright, Auntie says. - That's how girls behave who've had some harm done to them. (Cisneros 262)

Though Lala tries to process the traumatic event she has just witnessed, she is unable to deal with her experience because her own thoughts are much too overwhelming.³³ They are contaminated by outside voices and influences, just like the muddy water she describes. Though she wants to ignore some of these voices, they resurface and do not allow her thoughts to evolve in silence. As she tries to deal with her feelings, the banal and judgmental dialogue between the Awful Grandmother and Auntie Light-Skinned interrupts her train of thought. Though this dialogue fragments Lala's narrative, she still chooses to include it because it adds dimension and complexity to her story. As a narrator, she realizes the need for these voices and allows them to take their course, giving way to the dialogic heteroglossic narrative.

³³ The "traumatic event" refers to Lala's experience in a Mexican market when a man exposes himself in front of her.

The multiplicity of voices in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, while not as prominent as those in *Caramelo*, also suggests Oscar's entrapment between two cultures. While Mexican doubleness is marked by geographic proximity to the motherland and a constant attempt to integrate conflicting identity, Dominican identity is framed in different terms:

This off-centeredness of African-Caribbean immigrant identity is reflected in the frenetic pattern of the perpetual departures and arrivals as individuals attempt to find cultural space for themselves in the postcolonial or metropolitan world.³⁴

Conceptually, the Caribbean struggle with doubleness is similar to the Chicano struggle. However, Muller argues that it is manifested differently, through movement in different spaces as an attempt to find one cultural space that will accommodate the Dominican immigrant's identity. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this struggle is visible as Oscar tries to find himself by first leaving his American-Dominican community to go to college, then returning to his childhood home after graduation, and finally traveling to the Dominican Republic in order to reconnect with his roots. Unlike Lala, Oscar does not have extensive mobility between the two cultures because he is not as connected to the Dominican Republic as Lala is to Mexico. As a result, his personal drama is marked by long periods of time during which he tries to fit into whatever physical location he finds himself in at the time. At home he tries to be Dominican, in college he tries to be American, and this pattern repeats consistently until the end of his

³⁴ Gilbert Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 141.

life. As he attempts to reconcile the movement in Oscar's life, Yuniór creates a narratorial heteroglossia that, unlike the dialogic heteroglossia in *Caramelo*, does not allow for direct discourse between the voices in Oscar's life. Yuniór does not have the benefit of being inside Oscar's head, so he uses Oscar's experiences to create separations between the multitude of voices in his life.

Oscar's doubleness is his biggest impediment throughout his life. In college, he is excluded precisely because of his dual identity; he is simultaneously American and Dominican. The world he lives in--the college space that was supposed to be his escape from the stigmatizing world he grew up in--begs for categorization. Since Oscar is neither purely American nor purely Dominican, he is not accepted by either 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. And he said, over and over again. But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. (Diaz 49)³⁵

On one hand, Oscar's American classmates exclude him for purely physical reasons, because his skin and hair are overt signs that he is racially and ethnically different. On the other hand, his Dominican classmates exclude him for cultural and psychological reasons, because, as discussed in the previous chapter, he is un-Dominican and unmanly by their definition. Oscar then finds himself wanting to be accepted into both worlds and being accepted into neither. By repeating the phrase "Soy dominicano", he

³⁵ Though this example was previously used in Chapter 1, it is important for the analysis of Oscar's identity and his place within a multicultural story.

chooses one identity rather than blend the two; unlike Lala, he is unable to allow for a dialogue between his two cultures because the world he lives in functions in is black and white. His Dominican heritage does not give him automatic, full access into this community. Instead, he needs to fit a certain Dominican prototype that he does not meet because he has Americanized himself through education and conformity to social norms that respect women. This Americanization prevents him from fitting in with his fellow Dominicans and his attempt to be both American and Dominican fails. He constantly shifts physical spaces in order to move between these two worlds, hoping he will eventually be accepted into one.

The stylistic differences between *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reflect the differences between Lala and Yuniór as narrators. While Lala's narrative is fragmented and often interrupted by outside voices, Oscar's story is all filtered by the same narrator. As Oscar's storyteller, Yuniór presents the multiple voices in Oscar's life, but he does not attempt to integrate them. The linguistic pattern in the passage discussed above repeats itself throughout the book: Yuniór presents two clear alternatives, then chooses one and passes it off as Oscar's choice. Though this type of narration is much easier to follow and understand than Lala's, it is also much more simplistic and monotonal. By presenting multiple voices, Yuniór seeks to offer a holistic perspective on Oscar's life, but his strong narrator voice and his reason behind telling Oscar's story influence his stylistic choices.

The cultural duality that both Lala and Oscar experience is directly connected to their roles as characters within multigenerational stories. As Nancy Foner points out,

“immigrants live out much of their lives in the context of their families” and, although they “do not exactly reproduce their old cultural patterns when they move to a new land...these patterns continue to have a powerful influence in shaping family values and norms as well as actual patterns of behavior that develop in the new setting”.³⁶

Though Lala and Oscar are not immigrants, they are equally influenced by the cultural-familial patterns that Foner discusses. Analyzing the multiple voices in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a useful tool not only for understanding the complex cultural influences discussed above, but also the intricate multigenerational influences present in both Lala’s and Oscar’s narratives.

In *Caramelo*, the *caramelo rebozo*³⁷, the Awful Grandmother’s treasured possessions that stays with the family long after she is gone, represents the multigenerational story. The rebozo, as identified by Jordana Finnegan, functions as a constant symbol and reminder of the multigenerational story that underlies Lala’s personal story:

The caramelo rebozo, a coffee-colored woven shawl, exemplifies the novel’s message that identity is multidimensional and interconnected. The caramelo rebozo symbolically challenges autonomous individualism in conventional autobiographies and provides a model for the novel’s integration of multiple genres and narrative voices... The art of weaving a rebozo stands as a metaphor for interpersonal relationships across generations; each individual and family is

³⁶ Nancy Foner, “The Immigrant Family: Cultural Legacies and Cultural Changes,” *International Migration Review* 31 (1997): 962.

³⁷ The rebozo is a women’s garment that is often used as a scarf, shawl, or even a child-carrier.

shaped by the experiences of those who have preceded them, so that no story ever stands apart from or completes the rebozo's braided web of ongoing relationships.³⁸

Part II of *Caramelo*, which encompasses the story of Lala's grandparents, begins with the Awful Grandmother (Soledad) inheriting an "unfinished *rebozo*, the design so complex no other woman was able to finish it without undoing the threads and starting over" from her dying mother. (Cisneros 94) When Soledad's father asks her to leave, she takes with her two dresses, a pair of shoes, and the *rebozo*. The *rebozo* then becomes her only connection to her dead mother and to a family that cast her off; it is the start of the Reyes legacy as we know it. Throughout the story, the *rebozo* is the sacred symbol that connects one generation to the next. Multifaceted in nature, "the *rebozo*'s history is a metaphor for the adaptations and transformations of contemporary Chicana/o culture"³⁹. The individual strands that form the rebozo represent the multiple voices that contribute to the Reyes family history. These voices comprise the dialogic heteroglossia typical of *Caramelo* and blend together to form the ultimate product of the finished *rebozo*:

Even with half its fringes hanging unbraided like mermaid's hair, it was an exquisite *rebozo* of five *tiras*, the cloth a beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla stripes flecked with black and white, which is why they call this design a *caramelo*. (Cisneros 94)

³⁸ Jordana Finnegan, *Narrating the American West: New Forms of Historical Memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), p.133.

³⁹ Jordana Finnegan, *Narrating the American West: New Forms of Historical Memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), p.134.

The blended design of the *rebozo* mimics the stylistic choices that Lala makes in telling her story. She allows the multigenerational voices to dialogue in her narration just as the different colors in the *rebozo* combine with one another and eventually form a unique blend of *caramelo*. At the end of the novel, Lala assumes this mixed identity and her narration ends with her Father sharing the wisdom of his generation and “[adjusting] the *caramelo rebozo* on [Lala’s] shoulders properly”, reminding her “Only you have heard these stories, daughter, understand? *Solo tu*. Be dignified, Lala. *Digna*” (Cisneros 429). Lala’s envelopment in the *rebozo* signifies her place in the Reyes legacy and her acceptance of its heteroglossic nature and multigenerational legacy. She inherits the *rebozo* with all its history just as her narration inherits the multiplicity of voices. Her narrative is history and, as Jordan and Weedon point out, “whether public or personal, history is always an interpretation of the past, constructed in the present on the basis of a selective range of source materials.”⁴⁰ Thus, the history that Lala inherits from her father has already been filtered, a multitude of voices already introduced.

Lala’s acceptance of her complex identity is often shown through her multivoiced descriptions of her family. As she traces the moment when she realizes that she is just one part of a multigenerational saga, Lala remembers: “I could never draw myself without drawing the others. Lala, Memo, Lolo, Toto, Tikis, Ito, Rafa, Mama, Papa” (Cisneros 393). This cascade of subjects indicates an overwhelming presence in her life, a permeating and constant flow of family members. The presence of this

⁴⁰Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon. “Whose History Is It? Class, Cultural Democracy and Constructions of the Past,” in *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p. 117.

multitude of voices indicates Lala's inability to see herself independently from her family members. She cannot paint a self-portrait without also painting a portrait of her parents and siblings; she is a part of her family, but her family is also a part of her.

As she waits for her father to rescue her from Mexico City, where she has run away with her boyfriend, Lala acknowledges not only an emotional, but also a physical inability to distinguish herself from the generations that have come before her. She says, "Fumble to the bathroom, flick on the lights, and it's her! The Grandmother's face in mine. Hers. Mine. Father's. It scares the hell out of me, but it's only me. Amazing the way I look different now, like if my grandmother is starting to peer out at me from my skin" (Cisneros 394). The dialogic heteroglossia that we have come to expect from Lala is most obvious in this episode, when she recognizes that the Awful Grandmother and the Father are inherent parts of her identity. The fragmented sentence structure mirrors the overall fragmentation of *Caramelo* and further emphasizes the connection between the multigenerational story and Lala's stylistic choices in writing her narrative. This is Lala's epiphany moment, when she realizes that she is not just the narrator of her family's story, but an active character in an ongoing multigenerational saga.

Like Lala, Oscar is also part of a multigenerational story. However, since Yuniór filters his story, his interactions with the previous generations' voices are limited and much less dialogic. This crucial stylistic difference in narrative strategy between *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reflects the cultural differences between the two protagonists, as well as the roles they play within their families' multigenerational sagas. The very structure of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

speaks to Yuniór's tendency to compartmentalize the different voices in Oscar's life. He narrates the first chapter, which chronicles Oscar's life from 1974 to 1987. The second chapter is narrated by Lola, Oscar's sister, and spans their family's life from 1982 to 1985. The third, which is once again narrated by Yuniór, tells the story of Belicia Cabral, from 1955 to 1962. The fourth chapter continues Oscar's story from 1988 to 1992, while the fifth goes back in time to chronicle Oscar's grandfather's life, from 1944 to 1946. The sixth chapter tells the story of Oscar's last years, from 1992 to 1995, while the seventh and final chapter focuses solely on Oscar's last days. While Yuniór draws specific connections between the different generations of Oscar's family, the style of his narration does not integrate, but rather separates them.

This narratorial heteroglossia, which is different from Lala's dialogical, constant movement between voices and time periods is best modeled by the beginning of the chapter titled "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral, 1955-1962", when Yuniór interrupts the narrative of Oscar's life to tell the story of Belicia Cabral (Oscar's mother):

Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola like a dream, or the trumpest from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother, Hypatia Belicia Cabral. (Diaz 77)

Unlike Lala, Yuniór does not integrate the multigenerational voices into a constant conversation. Instead, he firmly positions Belicia in a timeline, emphasizing that the story he is about to tell came "before" Oscar and Lola and "before" the American Story – the story of Oscar's family's emigration to the US. This pattern continues in the fifth chapter, when Yuniór tells Oscar's grandfather's (Abelard) story. Though many

elements of Abelard's life are repeated by generations to come, Yuniór does not draw attention to these patterns. Instead, he drops parenthesized hints like "(you can already see where this is headed)" (Diaz 211) and "I only wish I could have read that thing (I know Oscar did too)" (Diaz 245) to signify moments that are relevant to the interconnectedness of the multigenerational story. These links are only loosely connected in the last pages of the book, when Yuniór looks back on Oscar's life and tries to draw moral lessons from it.

Like the threads in the *rebozo*, the thread that connects Oscar to the generations before him is love--or rather destructive love choices:

Every Dominican family has stories about crazy loves, about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar's family was no different. His abuelo, the dead one, had been unyielding about one thing or another and ended up in prison, first mad, then dead; his abuela Nena Inca had lost her husband six months after they got married. He had drowned on Semana Santa and she had never remarried, never touched another man. We'll be together soon enough, Oscar had heard her say. Your mother, his tia Rubelka had once whispered, was a loca when it came to love. It almost killed her. And now it seemed that it was Oscar's turn. *Welcome to the family*, his sister said in a dream. *The real family*. (Diaz 45)

The voices of generations past are unmistakably present in the passage above, though they do not seem to interact with one another. Though Yuniór's narration is multivoiced in nature, the voices are both stylistically and thematically separated. The generations do not learn from one another and although Lola pinpoints the destructive

pattern that connects their family, she simply watches Oscar follow in the footsteps of his ancestors. Yuniór's tone implies that she does nothing to stop him from making the same mistakes, just as previous generations did not learn from the past. The lack of dialogue between the voices in Yuniór's narration is directly connected to the fatalism in Oscar's life. He does not and cannot change these patterns, just as his grandfather, mother, and sister were unable to.

Lala's and Oscar's position as characters in multigenerational sagas raises the question of choice and fate or destiny. Their existence is inherently paradoxical: on one hand, their identities are multivoiced, encompassing voices of the past that should illuminate the present, but on the other hand, both stories seem to suggest that their protagonists are bound to repeat the mistakes of previous generations. However, the stylistic and narrative choices in the two narrations offer the key to parsing the differences between the outcomes of the two stories. Since the voices in *Caramelo* dialogue constantly with one another, they allow Lala to learn from the past. The voices in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, however, are separated, giving Oscar limited opportunities to learn from past mistakes and ultimately leaving him in the hands of fate and destiny.

As a narrator who tries to integrate voices that are in constant conversation with one another, Lala has the opportunity to learn from her family's mistakes and escape the patterns of previous generations. The Awful Grandmother's spirit gives her this opportunity in order to prevent Lala from repeating her mistakes. As they fight in the Father's hospital room, Lala asks, "Grandmother, why do you keep haunting me?" to

which the Grandmother replies, “Me? Haunting you? It’s *you* Ceyala who’s haunting *me*. I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did?” (Cisneros 406). Here, the Grandmother’s voice is in direct conversation with Lala, challenging her assumptions and posing difficult questions. Her spirit is the first to acknowledge that Lala repeats history by making the same mistakes that she writes about in her family’s story. Although Lala allows the voices of the past to converse with one another throughout her narration, she does not acknowledge these multigenerational patterns until the last pages of her story. This epiphany, triggered by the Awful Grandmother’s spirit, is directly related to Lala’s dialogic heteroglossic narration. The conversations between the cultural and familial voices that are sprinkled throughout Lala’s narration contribute to her ultimate acceptance of a multivoiced identity and her ability to learn from her family’s past mistakes.

Unlike Lala, Oscar is unable to learn from the multigenerational patterns that emerge throughout Yuniór’s narration. Early on in life, he embarks on a self-destructive journey of poor love choices that ultimately leads to his tragic ending. There is no one voice that draws Oscar’s attention to his impending doom, so he repeats his family’s mistakes much more frequently than Lala does. As Yuniór says, “If you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it. Oscar searched for it too, in his last days, and it’s not certain whether he found it either” (Diaz 243). Though there is textual evidence that Oscar searches for a solution to his love problems, he never gets the “full story” because he is unable to integrate the voices of the past with the voices of the present. The stylistic differences between *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* speak to the

thematic differences between Lala and Oscar's outcomes. Unlike Lala, Yuniór does not allow the voices in his narration to dialogue with one another; the generations and cultures are separated. This choice is reflective of the way Oscar treats his own quest for identity, by separating his Dominican side from his American side, as well as himself from his family's past. The constant movement between identities leads to his tragic ending and is reflected in Yuniór's narration of his life.

The patterns that both Lala and Oscar repeat are, in some ways, unavoidable. However, as we saw in Lala's case, they can also be reconsidered and ultimately repaired; it is never too late to change the story. In Oscar's case, destiny takes over from the beginning and leaves him very little choice. His ending can be predicted from the beginning of Yuniór's narration:

It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these 'supersitions'. In fact, it's better than fine – it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, *fuku* believes in you.

(Diaz 5)

This part of the prologue introduces fate (represented by the *fuku*) as a central element in Oscar's story. We find out that those haunted by the *fuku* have little agency in determining their own destiny. Whether or not they believe in it and whether or not they are superstitious, the *fuku* will get them. Rejecting or not believing in the *fuku* seems to intensify its power, presumably because being affected by something you do not believe in is much more powerful than being affected by something you do believe in. The prologue strengthens the idea that no matter what Oscar says or does, things will end up the same way. This concept turns Oscar's story from a multivocal into a

monovocal narrative because Oscar's interactions with the voices in his narration do not seem to matter; the outcome will always be the same.

In Lala's story, the question of destiny becomes much less important than her place within a multigenerational saga. Since the grandmother is there to chastise Lala, as seen in the passage discussed above, she is less likely to repeat the mistakes of her ancestors. Instead, Lala's narration ends with her acknowledgement that she is part of a cultural and multigenerational story and she cannot escape this. The acceptance of the Reyes family history brings Lala's narration to a point of harmony. After both hearing and telling a multi-generational story, Lala comes to terms with her own life and multivoiced identity as a Reyes. In the midst of her parents' thirtieth anniversary party, she thinks to herself, "...this is my life, with its dragon arabesques of voices and lives intertwined, rushing like a Ganges, irrevocable and wild, carrying away everything in reach...Names, dates, a person, a spoon..." (Cisneros 424). True to form, her narration is fragmented and perhaps even nonsensical, but her acknowledgement of the "voices" and "lives" that contribute to her own life introduces a version of Lala's identity that includes multiple generations, voices, and cultural elements. As the two stories come to a close, Lala's multivoiced, fragmented narration seems much more faithful to the ethnic identity than Oscar's monovocal narration.

This chapter leaves us with the conclusion that the voices in *Caramelo* are somewhat reconciled by the end of the story, while the same voices in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are overly simplified and transformed into a monovocal

narrative. The explanation for these results, I argue in the subsequent chapter, can be found in the difference between the reinvention of memory in each of the stories.

‘HOW I IMAGINE THESE STORIES HAPPENED’⁴¹

“Memory is the diary that we all carry with us” – Oscar Wilde⁴²

Memories are essential parts of our identities; the footprints of the past that dictate present and future. As A.P. Kerby articulates, “It is perfectly understandable that memory is seen by many thinkers as somehow founding our experience of personal identity and selfhood.”⁴³ For the narrators in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, memory is a vital part of the stories they tell. Both Lala and Yunior use the past, whether near or distant, to frame their narratives. Though they use their own recollections as springboards for their stories, they depend on collective memory in order to complete them.⁴⁴ They draw on the experiences of friends and family members to tie together the fragments of their own memories, attempting to create a narrative that speaks to the complexity of their ethnic experiences. However, as seen in our analysis of their multivoiced narratives, the presence of ‘othered’ voices often becomes problematic for both protagonists and narrators because these voices complicate what might otherwise be a simple journey to identity-formation. In order to address this problem, the narrators (Lala and Yunior) use memory as a tool for integrating the old with the new, the past with the present.

⁴¹ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003), p. 89.

⁴² Oscar Wilde, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (New York: Signet Classics, 1985), p. 113-191.

⁴³ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.21.

⁴⁴ “We ‘remember’ not only things that have actually happened to us personally, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, we ‘remember’ events, language, actions, attitudes, and values that are aspects of our membership in groups”: Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett and Robert E. Hogan, eds, Introduction to *Memory, Narrative, and Identity* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), p.17.

According to Terry DeHay, the ethnic narrator gives memory a new meaning, using it simultaneously as a tool of defense and control:

Remembering is the process of reclaiming and protecting a past often suppressed by the dominant culture, and in this sense, as re-visioning, it is essential in the process of gaining control over one's life ... it is an act of survival.⁴⁵

DeHay's "Narrating Memory", reads the reinvention of memory in ethnic literature as an act of protest against the dominant culture. Third World writers reinvent memory in order to counteract the traditional Western literature canon and protest the marginalization of their cultures.⁴⁶ Though this theory has dominated the field for some time, neither *Caramelo* nor *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* directly reflects this view. Lala and Oscar are not exclusively concerned with protesting the American culture, but with finding a niche for themselves, whether it be within the root culture or the adoptive culture. The narrators of the stories, Lala and Yunior, seek to integrate the complex web of relationships between history, culture, and family while simultaneously satisfying their own need for independence and uniqueness. For them, the reinvention of memory is a byproduct of the attempt to integrate particular aspects of the ethnic experience.

This chapter analyzes the connection between multivoiced narration and reinvention of memory in both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. It

⁴⁵ Terry DeHay, "Narrating Memory," in *Memory, Narrative, and Identity*, edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), p. 26.

⁴⁶ Terry DeHay, "Narrating Memory," in *Memory, Narrative, and Identity*, edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), p. 26-44.

works with the idea that reinvention of memory in ethnic literature is a form of protest against the dominant culture, but argues for a more complex explanation of its prominence in ethnic narratives. It treats the reinvention of memory as a necessary tool for integrating the Lala and Oscar's quest for identity and agency with their place in a multicultural and multigenerational story. The result of this reinvention of memory is different between the two novels, which is reflective of the identity of their narrators. While Lala is the keeper of her family's history and a direct actant in this story, Yuniior is the moralizer of Oscar's story, and thus not implicated directly in its intricacies. While the result of Lala's reinvention is a complicated, multivoiced narrative, the result of Yuniior's is a monovocal narrative that oversimplifies in order to create a cohesive story of Oscar's life.

According to Hermans and Kempen, the reinvention of memory through emplotment is an inherent part of any kind of narrative construction:

An essential feature of narrative is *emplotment*: constructing and interconnecting events in such a way that meaningful structures are developed. Emplotment marks the difference between a chronicle and narrative *construction*.⁴⁷

So, it seems natural for any kind of narrator to reconstruct events in a person's life in order to make them fit together in a cohesive narrative. However, this reconstruction blurs the lines between truth and fiction in both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In this case, the narrators take significant liberties with reconstructing past events in order to satisfy the present.

⁴⁷ Hubert J.M. Hermans and Harry J.G. Kempen, *The Dialogical Self: Meaning as Movement* (San Diego: Academic Press, Inc., 1993), p. 22.

The reinvention of memory conceptually fits into the idea of resistance literature, developed by Barbara Harlow in the book *Resistance Literature*. She defines the resistance novel as:

The resistance novels seek different historical endings and these endings are already implicit, contained within the narrative analysis and construction of the conditions and problematic of the historical situation itself.⁴⁸

Critics have used this theory to read the reinvention of memory in *Caramelo* as Lala's protest against the dominating voices that try to silence her:

...in *Caramelo*, the little Chicana heroine suffers from being the object of dominant discourse. Thus the heroine writes her, her family's and her race's history as a tool to challenge racism and sexism through the creation of her own discourse.⁴⁹

Though accurate, this reading is an incomplete explanation of the extraordinary process through which Lala finds her voice. It is true that Lala protests conventional history by reinventing it. Her conversations with the Awful Grandmother's spirit show that she changes elements of the past, things as insignificant as the description of a house (Cisneros 97-98) or as important as notable social implications (Cisneros 156). However, the dominating force in Lala's story is not American culture, but her grandmother's history. She uses a unique form of narration to reinvent it, though her ultimate goal is not to protest, but to find her own identity among the strong descendants of the Reyes

⁴⁸ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), p. 79.

⁴⁹ Esra Satiyanci Oztarhan, "Rememory and the Challenges of Histories in Cisneros' *Caramelo*," *Aegean Journal of English and American Studies* 13 (2004), p. 79.

family. While saying that “the rewriting of history is central to challenging racism and sexism by creating multiple and changing narratives”, Lala’s rewriting of history is also an attempt to incorporate the old with the new.⁵⁰ It is directly connected to her need to integrate the multiple voices that dialogue throughout her narrative and make up her own unique identity.

The disclaimer positions Lala in a tradition of “healthy lies”, but also gives her the power to reinvent memory as it suits her:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. (Cisneros)

The disclaimer implies that the objective ‘truth’ is not as important as Lala’s personal truth, which contains fragments stitched together to form “something new”. Though she resists it, Lala does not entirely shed conventionality, but uses existing fragments of her family’s history to create her own version of the past. Her admission and acceptance of the “healthy lies” she is about to tell demonstrate not only a conscious decision to reinvent memory, but also a conscious attempt to integrate the multiple voices in her narration. The bits of string that she ties together represent the voices of the past—her history, culture, and family—that she attempts to integrate in her own narrative. She takes whatever truths she knows and makes them her own, appropriating them to her

⁵⁰ Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, “Whose History Is It? Class, Cultural Democracy and Constructions of the Past,” in *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p. 243.

own identity. The disclaimer does not frame Lala's reinvention of memory as a protest against 'the norm', but rather as a tool for integrating the different voices in her life and creating a narrative that accommodates her multifaceted identity.

Though Yuniór does not explicitly reinvent memory in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his role as the narrator of Oscar's story is an implicit reinvention of memory. He filters the events of Oscar's life and Oscar's family's life in order to create a cohesive story that he is then able to pass on to Oscar's niece. The prologue, like the disclaimer to *Caramelo*, establishes the rules of truth and fiction in the story that is about to follow. Like Lala, Yuniór recognizes that the story he is about to tell may not be entirely objective. At the very least, he recognizes that Oscar's version of Oscar's life may not be the same as Yuniór's version of Oscar life when he says, "I'm not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation. *Fuku* story" (Diaz 6). This filtered version of the truth is more important to Yuniór than the actual truth, or the truth that Oscar would have wanted or written himself. Yuniór explains himself when he introduces the concept of *zafa*, which counteracts the *fuku* that supposedly governed Oscar's life:

Anytime you mentioned or overheard the Admiral's name or anytime a *fuku* reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word. *Zafa* ... Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell.
(Diaz 7)

The prologue establishes Yuniór's strong narrator voice and creates a clear purpose for his story: a *zafa* to counteract the *fuku* that has haunted Oscar's family for many generations. He becomes the moralizer of Oscar's story even though he does not hold a personal stake in the final product. Yuniór uses Oscar's story as a counter spell, a way of preventing the *fuku* from affecting any more people. However, the language of the prologue suggests that the story may be neither *fuku* nor *zafa*. The designation is not as important as the reasons behind it, the implications that accompany each name. Like Lala, Yuniór fights against the conventional 'truth' and emphasizes the personal truth, one that emerges out of interpretation. Looking at Oscar's life through *fuku* and *zafa* is a reinvention of memory and truth in and of itself because it directs all the events in Oscar's life toward one central interpretation, making Yuniór a moralizer of Oscar's story. According to A.P. Kerby, this is true of all narratives:

Narratives, traditionally conceived, seem inherently moralizing. The closure to human actions that they effect is often that of promoting one moral order over another. This is a thesis of Hayden White, one that he finds active in historical texts: it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats.⁵¹

However, Yuniór takes this idea one step further by framing Oscar's story as a *zafa*, as an active antidote against future tragedies. He makes Oscar's story into a lesson for his niece, transforming a multivocal narrative into a monovocal one.

⁵¹ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 63.

Framing Oscar's life as a *fuku* story exculpates Oscar from any detrimental choices he may have made. By taking away all or even part of his agency, Yuniór also takes away part of his responsibility in his tragic ending. He creates a clear cause for Oscar's death, using the reinvention of memory as a tool for managing all the voices in Oscar's life. Transforming Oscar's story into *zafa* has a similar effect: it filters all the events in Oscar's life through Yuniór's desire to counteract the *fuku* that haunts Oscar's family. Yuniór attempts to draw lessons from everywhere--whether a lesson is there or not--in order to make the *zafa* as potent as possible. He interjects himself within history, creating connections between voices and generations:

It wasn't long after that visit that Socorro realized that she was pregnant. With Abelard's Third and Final Daughter. *Zafa or Fuku? You tell me.*⁵² (Diaz 242)

Yuniór inserts the vocabulary that he uses in the prologue throughout the story, calling attention to the two words *-fuku* and *zafa*- that homogenize the legacy of the Leon family. He addresses the readers directly and gives us the opportunity to analyze the legacy of Oscar's family for ourselves. However, while these two words may help us create connections among a convoluted narrative, they also limit our understanding of the complexity of Oscar's and his family's experiences.

Yuniór's decision to frame Oscar's life as *fuku* and the writing of his story as *zafa* is a byproduct of the multiple voices in Oscar's life. These voices are disjointed in nature, but they can be reconciled through concepts such as *fuku* or *zafa*. Oscar's disorderly life has no rhyme or reason as he moves bewilderedly between spaces and

⁵² Abelard is Oscar's grandfather. His "Third and Final Daughter" is Beli, Oscar's mother.

identities. Likewise, his family's tumultuous past is tainted by political scandal, corruption, and disgrace. As Oscar's narrator, Yuniór needs to make these stories cohesive, so he uses a static vocabulary (*fuku* and *zafa*) to frame them as he searches for an explanation of all the tragedies in Oscar's family. As in Lala's narrative, the reinvention of memory is the best method for integrating and connecting the multivoiced narration that he presents. However, the two narrators differ in their reasons for reimagining the past.

Lala's reinvention of memory is direct and self-interested because she manipulates her family's history in order to contour her own identity. Her reason for writing the Reyes family saga is twofold: first to appease her dead grandmother's spirit and second as her own mechanism for reconciling the voices that haunt her. Appeasing the Awful Grandmother (though this does not surface until the end of the novel) seems to be the driving force behind Lala's narrative. As she chastises her granddaughter, the grandmother tries to prevent her from making the same mistakes that she has made and designates her the teller of her story:

I need everyone to forgive me. You'll tell them for me, won't you, Celaya? You need to tell them for me. I'm sorry, Celaya. You're good with talk. Tell them, please, Celaya. Make them understand me. I'm not bad... You'll tell my story, won't you, Celaya? So that I'll be understood? So that I'll be forgiven? (Cisneros 407-408)

Lala's narrative, then, is partly an exculpation of the Awful Grandmother, who wants to be understood and forgiven. By accepting to be her family's storyteller when she says,

“Tell, I’m listening” (Cisneros 408), Lala adopts the voices of the past and becomes their keeper. This is the moment when the grandmother gives her the power to reinvent her family’s history because she is “good with talk”. Lala’s mastery of the art of storytelling gives her tremendous power because she is able to control the flow of information and reinvent history by looking at the past through the present and integrating old and new voices.

Lala uses the power given by the grandmother to invent a mutated history, a history written purely for the development of her own identity. As she realizes that she cannot separate herself from the multiple voices in her life, Lala begins to integrate the fragmented aspects of her identity and narrative and creates the story, *Caramelo*, which we read. In order to do this, Lala reinvents the collective memory and creates her own truth--an attempt to turn a multivoiced, fragmented identity into a cohesive one. She speaks to this process several times throughout the novel:

AG: Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can’t you just tell the facts?

Lala: And what kind of story would this be with just facts?

AG: The truth!

Lala: It depends on whose truth you’re talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it. Now, will you allow me to proceed? (Cisneros 156)

Once again, Lala demonstrates that both memory and truth are subjective and dependent on the lens through which they are seen. Her primary concern is to tell a

story, the Reyes family story as seen through her eyes. She is not concerned with the pure facts, but rather with the bearing these facts have upon her as a descendant of the Reyes family. Lala seeks to learn from the story she tells and, in the process, develop her identity.

Unlike Lala, Yuniór does not use Oscar's story as a tool for developing his own identity. Rather, he writes it as a *zafa*, his own antidote to the curse that has been following Oscar's family over the past four generations. He reveals the true purpose of his narrative in the conclusion, when he tells his readers that he has written Oscar's story as a lesson for Oscar's niece, who might one day want to learn from it:

One day, though, the Circle⁵³ will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time she will hear the word *fuku*. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man. Not now, but soon. If she's her family's daughter-as I suspect she is-one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers. Not now, but soon. One day when I'm least expecting, there will be a knock at my door. Soy Isis. Hija de Dolores de Leon (I am Isis, daughter of Dolores de Leon). (330)

Yuniór's creation of the *zafa*--the antidote to the *fuku*--turns Oscar's life into a lesson for Isis. His fatalism resurfaces as he imagines that once the Circle fails to protect her and she heads for the same downfall as the four generations before her, Yuniór wants her to be able to read the story of Oscar's life and learn from it. Like Lala, Isis needs to learn from her family's mistakes, so Yuniór turns a multivocal narration into a monovocal one in order to make sense of the events in Oscar's life. As his friend, he is

⁵³ The "Circle" here refers to the protective Circle that is meant to ward off the evil eye – the *fuku* that has haunted Oscar's family for so many generations

unable to accept that Oscar's legacy will be meaningless or forgotten, so he attempts to make it useful, stealing some of its complexity in the process.

The association of truth with a monovocal narrative and the reinvention of memory with a multivocal narrative surface throughout both *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao* through the contrast between body and mind. As J.L. Moreno says, "The body remembers what the mind forgets", so it is the body -the more primitive of the two structures- that carries unbiased memory.⁵⁴ The body is one, one voice that cannot be denied. The mind, on the other hand, is multivoiced and multifaceted, much more malleable than the body. This theme is discussed differently in *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao*. In Lala's narration, the stark contrast between remembering and not remembering that is associated with body and mind. She verbalizes this dichotomy she crosses the border into Mexico:

The smell of diesel exhaust, the smell of somebody roasting coffee, the smell of hot corn *tortillas* along with the *pat-pat* of the women's hands making them, the sting of roasting *chiles* in your throat and in your eyes ... Every year I cross the border, it's the same - my mind forgets. But my body always remembers.

(Cisneros 18)

In this passage, Lala admits that her mind forgets Mexico, but her body recognizes the smells and feelings of the food associated with it - a immediate reaction to what makes Mexico a memorable place. The body, simple and primitive, remembers what the mind cannot. Though Lala's description of her bodily sensations is multivoiced, the voices all

⁵⁴Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," Lecture, Hampshire College, 1989.

blend into a physical feeling. The body does not mistake memories, but the mind, with all its complicated connections, forgets Lala's home country year after year.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Oscar's body represents one of the voices that constantly silence him throughout his life. His body is the main culprit for his stigmatization. Yuniors calls Oscar a "fat lonely nerdy kid" and says that:

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often) and it had become clear to everybody, especially in his family, that he'd become the neighborhood *pariguayo*.⁵⁵ (Diaz 19)

The people in Oscar's communities, whether American or Dominican, emphasize Oscar's physical qualities as his defining features. His weight, his masculinity (or lack thereof), his hair, and various other physical features are responsible for his stigmatization and exclusion from any community that he wants to be a part of. Oscar's body is one voice that follows him throughout his life. No matter how much he tries, he cannot change his physical appearance just as he cannot change the stigma that comes with the physical appearance. His body does not let him forget his past and the identity that he creates for himself. Like Lala, whose body remembers her Mexican roots, Oscar's body connects him to a static identity. Oscar's multifaceted personality--his fascination with comic books, his writing talent, and his sensitivity--is overlooked by those who choose to focus on the body, the physical, and ignore Oscar's complex nature. Ironically, though the body seems to represent truth, or at least objectivity, it

⁵⁵ "The kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him - he's the pariguayo" (Cisneros 20).

also represents a simplistic approach to identity, one that attempts to blend together the voices that are meant to discourse with one another.

In both Lala and Oscar's case, their bodies connect them to the past, to memories of previous generations. Lala realizes that she is physically connected to the past as she waits for her father in a Mexican bathroom:

...wake up with my head hurting, my mouth dry. Fumble to the bathroom, flick o the lights, and it's her! The Grandmother's face in mine. Hers. Mine. Father's. It scares the hell out of me, but it's only me. Amazing the way I look different now, like if my grandmother is starting to peer out at me from my skin. (Cisneros 394)

Her face embodies the voices of her family, both father and grandmother. They come together in her body to remind her of the legacy that she always carries with her.

Though it is a representation of her multigenerational legacy, the physical presence of the Father and the Grandmother in Lala's face does not allow her to exist as her own individual. Their image haunts her, so she fights back, "What you looking at?" she says, "in [her] toughest voice" (Cisneros 394). Paradoxically, her face becomes both multivocal and monovocal. While it is a constant reminder of her culture and family, it also represents a voice that silences Lala's evolving identity.

Like Lala, Oscar's bodily sensations connect him to his family's past. As he gets beat up in the canefields, Oscar feels comfortable in a familiar setting:

...never had he heard anything so loud and alien, the susurrations, the crackling, the flashes of motion underfoot (snake? mongoose?), overhead even the stars, all of them gathered in vainglorious congress. And yet this world seemed strangely

familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than déjà vu...(Diaz 298)

He hears, feels, and sees things from the past, the same sensations his mother had felt as she was being beaten up in the canefields. The body seems to be Oscar's true connection to the past, to a familiar pattern that eventually leads to his demise. We must remember, however, that it is not Oscar who describes his experiences in the canefields, but Yuniór. This description is not a reinvention of memory, but an invention, since Yuniór has no way of knowing what happened in the canefields. He attempts to use Oscar's imagined bodily sensations to draw connections between him and the generations that have come before him. Oscar's experiences in the canefields are figments of Yuniór's imagination, something he chooses to write in the story of Oscar's life in order to connect him to his family.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the simple observation that both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* contain a multitude of voices that merge together to form a magical narrative. These voices--dead grandmothers, wise fathers, loving sisters, and loyal friends--come to life within the text and participate in an ongoing conversation that is reflective of characters and narrators alike. Paradoxical friend and foe, they encompass the complexity of the ethnic experience while interfering with the creation of a stable identity. The ingenious narrator tackles these voices by reinventing memory and creating a hybrid between truth and fiction.

Lala, Oscar, and Yuniór--the main voices in the two novels--are all children of immigrants who are stuck between cultures and generations. They have the mobility to move between spaces because they are not committed to neither adoptive nor mother culture. They float, liable to be formed and influenced by those around them. Like chameleons, they have the ability to integrate into both worlds. While some of the theories and criticism discussed in this thesis applies to both immigrants and first-generation Americans, the reinvention of memory seems to be a phenomenon reserved for the children of immigrants because the memories they reinvent are often not their own, but their parents' or even their grandparents'. They are able to blur the lines between truth and fiction because they do not alter their own past, but that of the other voices within their lives.

Applying the themes discussed in this thesis to immigrant literature, such as the book *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, by Julia Alvarez, may yield different

results. Like Cisneros and Diaz, Alvarez engages multiple voices and challenges the chronology of the traditional novel by switching back and forth between locations in time and space. She uses the four Garcia sisters as prototypes for the different ways in which immigrants can function in a foreign land. Like Lala and Oscar, the Garcia girls attempt to find their identities between America and the Dominican Republic, battling cultural and familial forces along the way. While they do not explicitly reinvent memory, their individual narratives differ in the events they choose write about and, most importantly, the events they choose to forget. For the immigrant, reinventing the past does not seem to be as important as trying to forget it.

Whatever the case may be, the question of memory is germane to analyzing all immigrant narratives. As Oscar Wilde suggests in "The Importance of Being Earnest"⁵⁶, remembering the past is an essential quality of human life. For those caught between two cultures, memory becomes even more essential because it is often the only tie to a land, a culture, or a family forgotten.

⁵⁶ See the beginning of Chapter 3.

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