THE DIVERSITY PRIZE ESSAY
Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of Shadows of Your Black Memory and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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This article considers María Lugones's concept of faithful witnessing as a point of departure to think about the ethics and possibilities of faithful witnessing in literary contexts. For Lugones, faithful witnessing is an act of aligning oneself with oppressed peoples against the grain of power and recognizing their humanity, oppression, and resistance despite the lack of institutional endorsement. I engage the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Denise Oliver, and other scholars who offer methodologies and discourses on recognition, witnessing, and resistance. I argue that the feminist philosophical concept of faithful witnessing is a critical element of reading decolonial imaginaries. The article undertakes close readings of two novels in the Afro-Latinx and Afro-Hispanic tradition: Donato Ndongo’s Shadows of Your Black Memory and Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In these readings, the concept of faithful witnessing enriches the analysis of religious colonization and the gender violence inherent to coloniality.

Hey, World—here I am . . . I’m here, and I want recognition, whatever that mudder-fuckin word means.
—Piri Thomas, Down These Mean Streets

Success, after all, loves a witness, but failure can't exist without one.
—Junot Díaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

RECOGNIZING A DEMAND

Piri Thomas's groundbreaking book Down These Mean Streets offers a glimpse into the life of an Afro-Puerto Rican man coming of age from the 1930s to the 1960s (Thomas 1967). Peppered with fast “gutter language” and predicated on contentions with
racial and ethnic identity, the book opens with a prologue, young Piri hollering from the rooftop of his Spanish Harlem tenement: “I want recognition.”¹ In the text, Thomas offers the reader the opportunity to bear witness to the humanity and lived experiences of working-poor, racialized, and immigrant communities from the Great Depression through the civil rights era. What Thomas's Piri demands of us, the reader, is to see him against the grain of powerful tropes that cast Puerto Ricans and other racialized and oppressed groups as pathological peoples suffering from a culture of poverty.² Much of the radical post-1960s “coming-to-consciousness” literature by US Latinx and people of color makes similar demands of their readers: to witness and recognize the hostility of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy, the aftermath of colonization and migration, and the humanity and lived experiences of their subjects.³ Yet how can we read resistance in these texts? Is it possible to bear witness to what the authors offer or to what the characters narrate (and often demand)?

In Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions, María Lugones describes the act of “faithful witnessing” as a method of collaborating with those who are silenced. Lugones’s philosophical concept of “faithful witnessing” is both a political act and a feminist philosophical approach that aligns itself with women of color and decolonial epistemologies. Lugones deploys the concept of faithful witnessing as a strategy through which oppressed peoples form coalitions in order to combat multiple and systematic oppressions. In what follows, I provide context for the concept of faithful witnessing and offer some examples of faithful witnessing in two novels of the Afro-Latinx and Afro-Hispanic tradition: Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and Donato Ndongo’s Shadows of Your Black Memory (Díaz 2007; Ndongo 2007).⁴ In doing so, I argue that as Thomas’s narrative is responding to sociopolitical struggles of Latinxs and Afro-Latinxs in the civil rights era, so Ndongo and Díaz are responding to experiences of religious colonization in the twentieth century and coloniality and gender violence in the twenty-first. The concept of faithful witnessing can be a useful tool through which to analyze these texts and to read resistance in postcolonial and decolonial narratives.

**FAITHFUL WITNESSING AS FRAMEWORK**

Witnessing, as concept, has a long history within feminist, philosophical, decolonial, religious, and juridical debates. For example, in Witnessing beyond Recognition, Kelly Oliver develops a theory of subjectivity whose cornerstone is the very act of witnessing. Oliver contends that the Hegelian master–slave dialectic can leave the oppressed unrecognized, needing or desiring what only their dominators can provide (Oliver 2001, 80).⁵ The act of witnessing then enables unrecognized subjects to demand that their oppression be seen beyond the dynamics of agonistic recognition.

Oliver argues that victims of unthinkable oppressions such as the Holocaust or slavery “do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen. Rather, they witness to pathos beyond recognition” (Oliver 2001, 79). In the context of colonization and coloniality, Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes, “the demand for liberation
is also a demand for recognition,” and this is a twofold ethical act of giving and demanding (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 151–53). In Decolonizing Methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights the importance of “witnessing,” “claiming,” and “testimonio” as ways in which indigenous and colonized peoples can “make claims and assertions about [our] rights and dues” (Smith 2012, 144–45). Smith names claiming and testimony as central to the act of witnessing; testimonies, she argues, are vehicles through which “the voice of a ‘witness’ is accorded space and protection” (145). I am attentive to the articulation of the witnesses’ protected space and to the ways in which witnessing in literature could provide safe spaces to reflect on, and indict, violence, in particular the violence endemic to colonization and coloniality.

As Oliver’s concept of witnessing goes beyond agonistic Hegelian recognition, so Lugones’s concept of faithful witnessing, as a decolonial practice, goes beyond colonial epistemologies. Faithful witnessing, as a decolonial feminist tool, makes visible the often unseen consequences of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and gender (Lugones 2003, 4). Lugones theorizes witnessing by centering the struggles of women of color. She understands witnessing as a praxis of epistemic pilgrimaging against physical and metaphysical domination. This no doubt is dangerous in a real-world sense since witnessing threatens dominant powers and established scripts. “To witness faithfully,” Lugones explains, “one must be able to sense resistance, to interpret behavior as resistant even when it is dangerous, when that interpretation places one psychologically against common sense, or when one is moved to act in collision with common sense, with oppression” (7). Lugones underscores that in order to see resistance, one must be able to see domination, which itself is a subversive act. She argues that in the act of perceiving resistance to oppression “in their complex interconnections,” or beyond the colonial difference that “fragment[s] people categorically,” we can locate one another as “possible companions in resistance” (11). Faithful witnessing puts the viewer in the path of danger but also enables meaning to be conveyed against the grain of domination. This act offers a view from below, from within the matrices of oppression, and recognizes multiple forms of resistance (7).

Popular conceptions of witnessing define the act as a kind of bearing witness to types of truth, as in “eye-witnesses to historical facts or accuracy” (Oliver 2001, 81). Yet witnessing also has religious connotations: “witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious or now political connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or bearing witness” (83). It is this dual meaning that underscores my reading of Shadows of Your Black Memory through a faithful witnessing framework. The juridical and religious meanings of witnessing provide a space through which to analyze Ndongo’s narrative of one community’s experience with religious and political colonization in (Spanish) Equatorial Guinea.

Lugones further argues that faithful witnessing challenges singular narratives or dominant perspectives and in doing so takes one away from singular interpretations of truth, knowledge, and rights and toward a polysensical approach: one that understands that there are many worlds, that sees/reads many perspectives, particularly the perspectives of those who are dehumanized or rendered invisible. One way that these
multiple narratives are conveyed in the literature is through the use of multiple nar-
rators or multiple perspectives of the same moments or experiences. An example of
this can be seen in the way that Díaz provides multiple and competing narratives in
Oscar Wao. In fact, as I later argue, Díaz’s characters bear witness to the physical, his-
torical, and psychosocial violence of coloniality.

Lugones refers to two distinct perspectives: a view from above and a view from
below. For Lugones, there is “the bird’s-eye view—the perspective from up high . . .
or the analysis of life and history. There is the pedestrian view—the perspective from
inside the midst of people, from inside the layers of relations and institutions and
practices” (Lugones 2003, 5). The view from above represents an assumptive view
invested in vestiges of history and the mechanisms of oppression, whereas the view
from below negotiates oppression through (inter)relational practices. For Lugones, the
pedestrian view is one that understands internal and external meaning, one that,
because it sees relations from up close, can provide ways of seeing and resisting
erasure and indifference to oppression.

Faithful witnessing offers a lens through which to recognize the assertion of
humanity and dignity in moments that would otherwise be unseen or ignored. In fact,
the concept of faithful witnessing has been used in ethnographic research with speci-
fic attention to LGBTQ youth of color. Cindy Cruz’s “LGBTQ Street Youth Talk
Back: A Meditation on Resistance and Witnessing” offers faithful witnessing as a
framework for understanding those who bear the weight of interlocking/intermeshed
oppressions. She argues that employing faithful witnessing in ethnographic work acts
as recognition of the “rejection of this radical othering that often happens in social
science research” (Cruz 2011, 553).9

Faithful witnessing is what happens when a person is not complicit with the pow-
ers that dehumanize others. Cruz’s study shows how faithful witnessing offers an
“opening for critical and decolonizing ways to position ourselves as researchers of
color, in standpoints that help us recognize these gestures of resistance” (Cruz 2011, 550;
emphasis mine). It is in the faithful witnessing of the moments of resistance, failures,
deceptions, triumphs, violence, love, and small histories that one actively participates
in the affirmation of other voices and the substantiation of other truths. Without this
kind of recognition, histories are erased, silenced, and ultimately invalidated as
human experiences.

What undergirds my reading of faithful witnessing is the concept of the decolonial
attitude: a critical philosophical and practical attitude that takes seriously the knowl-
edge of those who have historically been silenced, cast as ahistorical subjects, or con-
sidered insignificant.10 According to Maldonado-Torres, the decolonial attitude
sustains a “new ethics beyond coloniality” and is an “expression of an ethical subjec-
tivity that defines and positions itself in a way that promotes decolonization and
re-imagines human relationships” (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 242). From this point of
view, I take seriously the work of fiction produced by “postcolonial” peoples and read
these works against the grain of power toward a decolonial praxis.
WITNESSING COSMOLOGIES COLLIDING

Ndongo’s novel, Shadows of Your Black Memory, is perhaps the most well known literary text in the Equatoguinean canon. The novel is at once a fictional account of Spanish colonization in Equatorial Guinea and the writing of a particular subject: an Equatoguinean in exile who witnessed the political transitions of Equatorial Guinea and Spain during the late 1960s. Shadows tells the story of a boy being raised within two cultures: his Fang community, of which his uncle is the leader, and that of the Spanish Catholic missionaries of whom he is a student. The text, written as a retrospective account from the vantage point of adulthood, articulates the contact between two worlds, each fighting to survive the other. The narrator’s uncle, Tío Abeso, is the community’s leader, but his father seems to embrace Catholicism and the sweeping changes being made in the nation. Throughout the text, Tío Abeso and the Spanish priest Father Ortiz battle for the young narrator’s loyalty. They each see him as a vessel through which their respective world-views will withstand the imposed new order by the colonizers.

The boy, a witness to these debates, begins to see the ways in which Tío Abeso is fighting not only Father Ortiz but also what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o deftly describes as colonialism’s cultural bomb. Ngũgĩ argues that this cultural bomb effectively annihilates people’s “belief in their names, in their language, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (Ngũgĩ 1987, 3). Furthermore, it fosters disidentification and cultivates a sentiment of ahistoricity: “It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland” (3). Throughout the narrative, there are moments where the boy rejects and disidentifies with his own extended family and community, seeing them as “dimwitted” and “savage” (Ndongo 2007, 59). In one instance, alongside the priest on his conversion mission, the boy notes,

With the priest I asked myself if all those dirty smelly blacks, no matter that they were dressed in their Sunday best, if those poor folks devoured by mosquitos, reduced to a hypnotic, irreversible state by dysentery and malaria, always looking lethargic, dazed, submissive, if only those men, women, and children, so dimwitted, so attached to the savage nature surrounding them, were worthy of the immense goodness I was trying to bring them as I offered the possibility of a new life, eternal life, amen, per omnia secula seculorum, trying to rid them of their idolatry and elevating them to the supreme category of civilized beings. (Ndongo 2007, 59)

Here the narrator exemplifies one of the effects of the cultural bomb that “makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves . . . . It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams” (Ngũgĩ 1987, 3). In fact, the boy thinks that his uncle’s rejection of Catholicism and the Spanish occupiers is a contempt born out of ignorance. Tío Abeso, he recounts, “saw no advantage at all in
making friends with the white occupiers; and that was the origin of his contempt of those who were ignorant of your people, a contempt you thought was spite” (Ndongo 2007, 84–85).

The readers are spectators to the indoctrination of the narrator into these competing world-views. Early in the narrative, the boy is chosen to be the companion of Father Ortiz and to assist him as translator as he preaches to different members of the community (many of whom are the boy’s extended-family members),

Yes, you assisted him and in all the villages you instructed the black savages to rid themselves of totemic symbols, lances, arrows dipped in poison, masks, wood figurines, bronze effigies, and rums while you spoke of the wrath of God against those who kept the devil inside, and Father Ortiz took all those things away to burn them, or so he said. (23)

The boy, proud of his status as an altar boy and assistant to the priest, takes seriously the task of conveying the damnation that people were sure to earn by rejecting the admonishments of Father Ortiz. His instruction, in both the church and at the Catholic school with his pedantic teacher Don Ramón, creates a dichotomous reality with life at home as the nephew of the community’s leader. His school experiences read like pages from Ngũgĩ’s and Fanon’s narratives on colonial education. Students were trained to speak in Spanish, were taught Spanish history, and were punished for any sign of speaking their indigenous languages:

[When] Don Ramón asked you what you were your little voice stood out clearly: all of us together are Spaniards by the grace of God! And why are we Spanish? Intoned Don Ramón, and your clear voice again stood out: we are Spaniards blessed for having been born in a country called Spain. And with Don Ramón’s facile explanations you accepted the inexorable and inextricable absurdity of successive centuries: Spaniards had come to save you from anarchy because your ancestors were heathens, barbarians, cannibals, idolaters, who kept cadavers in their dwellings, vestiges of savagery that you censored along with Father Ortiz. (22–23)

In the presence of Don Ramón and under the influence of Father Ortiz, the boy takes on the colonial attitude and perspective of the Spanish missionaries. He begins to see his own people and his family as fetishistic and uncivilized and looks to Spain and Christianity as beacons of civility and progress.

The boy constantly negotiates his beliefs and practices, at one point daydreaming about his future as an adult man in the tribe: “I’d be able to go hunting with Tío Abeso; ... I’d sit down with the elders in the meeting house and no one would be able to say, hey you kid, don’t bother your elders” (32–33). Straddling two worlds, he never wavers from faithfully witnessing the competing realities. He bears witness to the shifts within his family and community and the Church’s assault on Fang cosmology. He does so retrospectively, acknowledging that the political and religious oppressions as well as the resistance practices are intermeshed with one another. Though he admires the Church officials, he does not hide or underplay their disdain for his
community. Yet he equivocates on whether he could ever live the life of a peasant farmer like his father, going on, “day after day, always, back and forth”; in comparison, a prospective life in the priesthood appeals to him (96).

In one of the most riveting moments of the novel, the boy bears witness to a debate between Tío Abeso and Father Ortiz. While Father Ortiz never loses hope of converting Tío Abeso to Christianity, Tío Abeso maintains his acts of resistance with the goal of getting rid of Father Ortiz and the missionaries:

He would call my uncle a blasphemer and tell him he would go to hell. And with infinite patience Tío Abeso answered that at the moment they were not in a territory of the white man’s tribe, that he hadn’t gone to the other man’s tribe trying to convert everyone to his belief, and he told the priest there was no reason for him to be angry, and he asked him whether he could give me any idea how to find that place where I will burn, and whether he has been there. (86–87)

Tío Abeso and Father Ortiz, with the boy as translator, go on to discuss matters of polygamy, medicine, law, land, and the worship of ancestral and religious figures. In this debate Tío Abeso argues that Fang traditions are no stranger than Father Ortiz’s cosmological beliefs, and he questions whether Father Ortiz has seen any of the transcendental planes of which he preaches. Father Ortiz, whose definitive mission was to convert Tío Abeso, retorts by calling him a blasphemer, an idol worshiper, and a licentious adulterer (85–93).

At this critical moment the boy translates between Father Ortiz, who does not speak Fang, and Tío Abeso, who does not speak Spanish. When Father Ortiz realizes that Tío Abeso is besting him, he regrets that the boy is listening: “The priest kept looking at me because I should not have heard such things, but he couldn’t have communicated with my uncle if I hadn’t been there. I was indispensable, a necessary drive to accomplish his apostolic mission” (92). Through this act of translation, the boy witnesses what each of these men believes to be true. As he recounts the debate between them, he clues in the reader to the unspoken sentiments in the room. He notes, “I was observing the last splendors of a world that was disappearing forever, and another very different one was arriving; I couldn’t embrace either one” (93).

Though the boy recognizes that Tío Abeso was the only forceful resistance in the tribe, “the one who refused to capitulate, the one who wanted to keep the torch burning; he was the light that your generation was dimming little by little,” his internal conflict leads him to pursue the priesthood in Spain (24). Through his careful and faithful retelling of his family history and his own experiences, the boy acknowledges the humanity of his family and community. Although he understands that colonial religiosity could not eradicate his family ties, he also recognizes that Tío Abeso’s resistance could not erase the reality of colonial devastation in Equatorial Guinea. Near the end of the novel, as the boy undergoes a family ritual, he comes to consciousness, thinking: “[A]nd despite your brief thirteen years you were convinced that although you would one day cross the ocean and go beyond, you would always have the spirit of the tribe within you, the blood of the tribe, you would always hear
the tribe whispering to you” (143). The boy confronts the reality of being torn between his role as a member of his family and Fang community and his potential future in the church.

The novel ends with an admission: Tío Abeso and the boy’s father had encouraged his studies with the missionaries while teaching him their family history and bringing him into the Fang community through various rites of passage. The boy’s father was an initial link to the church; in allowing his son to become an altar boy and companion of the priest, he was engaging in methods of resistance: infiltrating the space of the occupiers. After this revelation, and in a seeming narrative twist that complicates simplistic narratives of consciousness and resistance to domination, the boy asks permission to travel to Spain to become a priest. His eventual return as an adult (the beginning of the novel) is a key moment, another coming-to-consciousness, which compels him to do what is dangerous, to recount his family story and bear witness to the violence of religious colonization.

In this way Shadows of Your Black Memory rejects teleology and instead offers a view from within the overwhelming conflict the boy faces, a view from below. He narrates the double consciousness that has shaped his world-view with special attention to the multivalent resistance of Tío Abeso and the strategic positionality of his father. The boy’s experience is evocative of what Ngugi calls a contemporary post-colonial struggle, “an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other” (Ngugi 1997, 2). And though the narrator engages both worldviews, often taking on the dehumanizing point of view of Father Ortiz, he does not vacillate in his faithful witnessing of these internal and external conflicts. In doing so, he attests to the cosmological shifts and retrospectively indicts himself and the Church in the hegemonic colonial process. His adult perspective serves as a challenge to the occupier’s history of the colonizing process by going beyond colonial epistemologies, while challenging the misguided ideologies that cast his familial Fang community and Equatoguineans as ahistorical peoples. In this context, the concept of faithful witnessing allows the narrator to offer a fragment of this story while referencing the national occupation of Equatorial Guinea and providing the context for his choice to leave and eventual choice to return.

A WITNESS TO COLONIALITY

Since The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a particularly Caribbean, US, and diasporic novel, a transnational and decolonial reading of this text is fitting. The novel strategically marks European contact with the Caribbean as the advent of a centuries-long curse, the **fúki**, and makes visible the effects of coloniality in the Dominican Republic and in diaspora. Violence, private indirect government, and heteropatriarchal structures all make appearances in the novel, and most of their powers are wielded over women’s and queer bodies. Both the characters and the reader(s) witness how the power structures of coloniality reach across spatial and generic bounds.
Though some reviewers argue that Díaz’s work replicates and venerates heteropatriarchal normativity and misogyny, I pose that Díaz’s writing allows the reader to bear witness to the ways in which coloniality exerts powers over and commits violence upon bodies deemed to be insignificant. I argue that Díaz’s narrative offers an opportunity to faithfully witness the founding violence of colonization via the traveling curse fukú, the legitimization of violence through Trujillo’s dictatorial rule, and the normalization of gender violence across temporal and spatial planes. In fact, Díaz’s most recent interview sustains this argument. In engaging these critiques, he asks: “[i]f Yunior is simply an objectifying misogynist then why is he so preoccupied with bearing witness to the transnational rape culture that women are victimized by?” (Taylor 2015, 107).

Oscar Wao has multiple faithful witnesses in the form of its narrators: the primary narrator Yunior; two sections narrated by Oscar’s sister Lola; the ever-present footnote narrator who contradicts and enhances the story arc; and Oscar’s narration, which is presented through his final letter. Yunior’s adult retrospective narrative, however, is the main line through which we hear the stories of Oscar and his family. Like the nameless narrator in Shadows of Your Black Memory, Yunior’s perspective is key to hearing the polysensical truths and relations within the de León family. However, unlike the narrator in Shadows of Your Black Memory, Yunior is in a seemingly peripheral position, as he is not a member of the immediate family but rather a witness to their stories as Oscar’s best friend and as a sometimes, mostly unfaithful, lover of Oscar’s sister Lola.

In many ways, Yunior is both within and outside the story, and yet he refers to himself as a “faithful watcher,” a phrase that conjures both the fantastic and the philosophical. The ability of the text to genre play, provide a multiplicity of narratives, and trouble familial, colonial, and postcolonial histories, while indicting coloniality and imagining futurities outside of the material, makes it a decolonial text. This undermining of singular narratives is also a form of faithful witnessing against the grain of oppression. A decolonial reading of Oscar Wao highlights how Díaz destabilizes dominant tropes of masculinity and serves as witness to and critic of a thirty-year-long dictatorship and state-sponsored terror on women’s and queer bodies.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao tells the story of Oscar de León, a hopeless anti-hero who does not fit into the mold of Dominican masculinity: “He had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn’t have pulled a girl if his life depended on it” (Díaz 2007, 19–20). Oscar’s life is narrated through an analysis of his family history, of Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, and of diaspora to the US. The fukú is the catalyst for the story and it is associated with European imperial expansion. As such, the colonial project is indicted as its accelerant, and in the narrative the key to unraveling the de León fukú is by tracing it back to founding violence and dictatorship (1).

Early in the novel we are introduced to El General Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic’s thirty-year dictator who controlled almost every part of the Dominican Republic’s “political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated
the country like it was a plantation and he was the master” (2). The narratives of Oscar’s mother, Belicia, violently thrust into diaspora, and his sister, Lola, shuffled back and forth from the US to the island, are critical to understanding the fukú to which Oscar falls victim. Each of these characters’ narrative arcs is central to the critique of the kinds of violence engendered by coloniality and dictatorship: that of singular authority.

Díaz resists the traditional structure of the novel by writing-in multiple and conflicting narrative voices. Furthermore, the competing familial, political, and historical narratives battle teleology and contest foundational histories. I argue that by faithfully witnessing sites of interpersonal and state-sponsored violence (and resistance to that violence), the text challenges heteropatriarchy, coloniality, and the normalization of violence. The narrators witness what is understood to be secretive: the family curse and its history; deadly: resistance to Trujillo and existing power structures; and silenced: the violence wielded against women’s and queer bodies.

Many critical and literary analyses focus on Oscar’s apparent masculine deficiencies and his “queer Otherness.” Although these offer necessary and judicious readings of the text, I want to shift the focus from Oscar’s queer masculinity and lack of hyper-sexual prowess and what he “loses” (sex and romantic relationships) to what he gains from being on the sidelines: witnessing the sexual, psychosocial, and physical violence enacted on the bodies of women. Oscar’s position as a romantic ne’er-do-well allows him to gain proximity to potential love interests who are often involved in abusive relationships. In this way, experiences of gender violence emerge as central to the narrative.

Most of the women Oscar encounters are steadily subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Oscar’s queer otherness allows him to witness intimate forms of violence that would otherwise go unseen, unheard, or unmarked. Oscar documents his neighbor Maritza’s tumultuous relationship: “Maritza was a girl who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends ... being pushed down onto the sidewalk” (Díaz 2007, 18). Soon it becomes clear that Maritza is not alone, but rather all of the women in the novel, and Oscar’s own queer body, are subjected to threats, violence, and torture. The novel, which is about diaspora, the intimate ties with terror, and the enduring legacy of colonialism, is simultaneously an account of the normalization of gender violence and bodily terror.

These often gruesome details are central to the text and serve as documentation of commonplace violence. In another instance, Ana, one of Oscar’s teenage love interests,confides in Oscar about her relationship, telling him how her boyfriend Manny “smacked her, Manny kicked her, Manny called her a fat twat, Manny cheated on her” (44). Even Oscar is featured in one of these violent bouts, as Yunior recounts how he targeted and destroyed the room of his college crush Jenny when he finds her with another man (187). The reader also stands witness to the unspeakable, Lola’s rape, which she mentions but once as “when that thing happened” (57). And here too Yunior acts as a faithful witness, loyally conveying Oscar’s experience, although he features as one of the emotionally abusive men in Oscar’s accounts. In fact, Yunior tells us: “Success, after all, loves a witness, but failure can’t exist without
one” (149). Díaz’s text highlights how domination (be it dictatorship or other forms of sociopolitical power) desired silent spectators, and the narrative points to and offers multiple ways to faithfully witness the failures of coloniality from the perspective of those on the underside.

Central to the narrative is the experience of Belicia, Oscar’s mother, whose experience with her boyfriend, the Gangster, led to her escape from the Dominican Republic. Belicia meets the Gangster at a nightclub, and Yunior’s narrative reports, “Santo Domingo was to popola what Switzerland was to chocolate. And there was something about the binding, selling, and degradation of women that brought out the best in the Gangster” (121). Perhaps the most brutal of violent acts is committed against sixteen-year-old Belicia. Unbeknownst to her, the Gangster is married to Trujillo’s sister. Belicia is kidnapped and mercilessly beaten in a cane field, a prominent backdrop in the novel, the place where Oscar is executed at the end of the novel.

Belicia’s vicious attack causes a miscarriage and extensive bodily damage. Yunior briefly recaps the beating and her wounds:

How she survived I’ll never know. They beat her like she was a slave, like she was a dog . . . . damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture (she would never again have much strength in that arm); five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth blown out. About 167 points in damage . . . I suspect there was [a rape or two]. (147)

Belicia’s beating in the cane field is a recurring image in the novel; its retelling becomes a reminder to the reader that violence against women is not scaled down, but rather exacerbated. It does not stay on the island but rather is replicated and travels with and within diaspora.19

Furthermore, Belicia’s massive back scar, a product of her time as a criada (a role akin to a child servant), is a constant reminder of how violence is wielded against the bodies of girls. Her seemingly unloving treatment of her daughter Lola is one of the ways we can see how foundational violence imbues her most intimate family relations. Lola laments about her tense relationship with her mother: “She was that kind of mother: who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her . . . . For a long time I let her say what she wanted about me, and what was worse, for a long time I believed her” (56). This strained relationship with her mother, alongside the sexual and bodily violence she witnesses in her relationships and within her family, makes Lola critical of violence as a normal state of family and social relations (324).

In a transnational twist of fate, Oscar finds himself as the victim of physical violence at the hands of “Third World Cops” (291). Oscar’s last love interest, Ybón Pimentel, is the girlfriend of a high-ranking police officer in the Dominican Republic (the similarity to Belicia’s experience with the Gangster cannot be understated). Whereas the ensuing violence against Oscar is front and center, the violence and brutality against Ybón takes place behind the reader’s gaze. In a brief retrospective, the narrator informs us, “Of course the captain had beaten the shit out of [Ybón]
too, of course she had two black eyes (he’d also put his .44 Magnum in her vagina and asked her who she really loved)” (304). In the final chapters of the novel, after Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic to be with Ybón, they are caught together and Oscar is summarily executed in the cane fields. After the murder, Ybón, once a retired sex-worker, is only briefly mentioned as “dancing” again at another nightclub in the city (323). With Oscar dead, Yunior’s faithful witnessing and his reading of Oscar’s journals, papers, and letters are the only documentation of the love and tragedy that transpired.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the faithful witnesses spare no details about the precipitous violence and the danger in telling what is supposed to remain unseen and unspoken. From Oscar’s battle with love, depression, and weight loss, to Lola’s abusive relationships, to their mother Belicia’s enduring trauma with the scars to match, the faithful witnessing by the narrators validates the lived experiences of these characters, following them from the Caribbean to the US and back. Lugones tells us that faithful witnessing is an act against oppression on the side of resistance, an act that though dangerous, can build coalitions between oppressed peoples and validate nondominant truths and experiences. The writing and reading of literature, then, is one way in which historical, present, and future possibilities can be imagined and offer lenses through which to witness resistance. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an example of a fictional text that resides in the interstices of history, narrating it from afar. The novel’s plot is intimately tied to the history of the Dominican Republic, the stories of Oscar’s mother and sister, and the forces of diaspora. Faithful witnessing offers a lens for reading decolonial imaginaries, spaces where the coloniality of power, gender, and knowledge are countered and confronted.

**SO MUCH UNHEARD**

Because the coloniality of power produces and reproduces foundational dehumanizing violence, most kinds of historical, structural, and gender violence are masked in the hubbub of the everyday. Faithful witnessing as reading practice allows us to see dehumanizing colonial violence and coloniality and acts of resistance to violence and oppression. That is, the literary practice of faithful witnessing enables the narrators to bear witness to stories, histories, and truths that may have gone untold, unnoticed, and silenced. Furthermore, literature, written and read with a decolonial attitude, can open a discursive space for critical questioning and imagining. As Juan Tomas Ávila Laurel, an Equatoguinean poet, novelist, and activist, noted, “I only want my work to incite questions and interest in the topic. So much is unheard.” Ávila Laurel is referring to the sociopolitical content of work by Equatoguinean writers who often use literary fiction to speak about the harsh realities of political oppression, exile, and resistance.

In *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, faithful witnessing does not function as an act of observing, but rather is often a seconding and thirding of unrecognized (hi)stories. Faithful witnessing, then, is not only
useful in reading Díaz and Ndongo, but can also be helpful in decolonial readings of other Latinx, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-Hispanic texts. Some examples in a comparative ethnic studies context are María Nsue Angüe’s Ekomo (1985), Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), Lê Thị Diệm Thúy’s The Gangster We Are All Looking For (2004), and Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco (1998), to name a few.

Literature as bodies of work that incorporate and traverse boundaries of fiction and history are critical to the development of decolonial strategies and methods. Reading these texts with a decolonial attitude opens discursive spaces for reading and witnessing resistance, and for decolonial theorizing. History as it needs to be done after 1492 necessitates faithful witnesses, because the present and the past demand redemption from the imperial colonial project of the past five centuries. We are fixed in an ethical relationship in the present that requires faithful witnessing. If we are looking to our pasts, to our futures, and/or to our present moments, it is our responsibility not to collude with those who have stripped others of their humanity by denying their voices, intellects, histories, or freedoms. The nameless narrator in Shadows of Your Black Memory and the multiple narrators in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao exemplify a turn away from the dominant form of chronicling—beyond colonial epistemologies. Faithfully witnessing, in this context, destabilizes foundational and singular and silencing narratives, recognizes resistance to oppression, and privileges perspectives from below.

Notes

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1. The term gutter language appears in Daniel Stern’s review of Down These Mean Streets (Stern 1967, 44).

2. For a primary example of culture of poverty theory as it relates to Puerto Rican families, see Lewis 1966.

3. Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez coins the term coming to consciousness literature in her monograph (Sanchez Gonzalez 2001).

4. Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra (Ndongo 1987) or Shadows of Your Black Memory (Ndongo 2007) is the most well known text of the Equatorial Guinean literary canon.
5. Oliver is not without critics, however; Michael Monahan’s “Recognition beyond Struggle: On a Liberatory Account of Hegelian Recognition” argues that there is another path through which to understand Hegelian concepts of recognition, one that is not the eternally agonistic “master–slave dialectic”—that is, the concept of pure recognition. Monahan’s elucidation of pure recognition, as he notes, however, does not invalidate the myriad critiques of Hegelian agonistic recognition. See Monahan 2006.

6. Here Smith also notes that testimonio is a familiar project in Latin America, one that “has become one of a number of literary methods for making sense of histories, of voices and representation, and of the political narrative of oppression” (Smith 2012, 145).

7. Donna McCormack reads fictional narratives at the intersections of queer and postcolonial studies through a framework of witnessing in Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing. Although McCormack does not engage the concept of faithful witnessing, she does use witnessing, recognition, and the importance of seeing these as critical concepts in fictional narratives; see McCormack 2014.

8. This critique of imposed colonial epistemologies harkens back to Ngũgĩ’s assertion that centering indigenous languages could provide for a decolonial practice that goes beyond hegemonic colonization; see Ngũgĩ 1997.

9. One example that Cruz offers is of a queer black man who is ignored in the predominantly middle-class gay community of gentrifiers. In a moment of crisis and attempted suicide, this young man chooses composure when confronted with police involvement. Cruz reads this moment as an act of resistance, highlighting the young man’s “stoicism” as a survival strategy in the face of looming police violence. Cruz argues: “recognition of the resistance in these tight spaces belies a history of often hostile negotiations and struggle waged by LGBTQ youth everyday” (Cruz 2011, 553).

10. The concept of the decolonial attitude is part of an intellectual conversation related to Husserl’s conception of the phenomenological attitude, Heidegger’s and Sartre’s work on authenticity, and Habermas’s philosophical meditation on the post-conventional attitude. The term decolonial attitude, coined by Maldonado-Torres, makes reference to a subjective disposition toward knowledge. For more on the decolonial attitude, see Maldonado-Torres 2006 and 2008.

11. Michael Ugarte’s Africans in Europe articulates Ndongo’s unique position as a Spanish writer and journalist in the 1970s: “[H]e was strange: a colonial subject of flesh and bone—we needn’t forget his skin . . . . Writing from the subject position of a black man is uncommon, if not completely absent, in the annals of Spanish literature” (Ugarte 2010, 25).

12. This moment of contact in 1492 is what many scholars point to as the birth of modernity. See James 1938/1963; Williams 1944/1994; Mintz 1974; Beckles 1997.


14. For some reviews on misogyny in the writing of Díaz, see Nussbaum 2008; Coffey 2011; Clay 2012.

15. Achille Mbembe argues that “commandment” is part of the imaginary of the power state/colonial sovereignty. Commandment features three sorts of violence: founding violence, legitimation of violence, and finally “war,” which refers not only to our contemporary articulations of war, but also to the violence that maintains, spreads, and ensures permanence. See Mbembe 2003.
16. On futurities beyond the material, see Figueroa 2015.
17. One notable example is Machado Saez 2011.
18. “Poor Oscar. Without even realizing it he’d fallen into one of those Let’s Be Friends Vortices, the bane of nerdboys everywhere. These relationships were love’s version of a stay in the stocks, in you go, plenty of misery guaranteed and what you got out of it besides bitterness and heartbreak nobody knows. Perhaps some knowledge of self and women” (Díaz 2007, 41).
19. We see Ana’s and Maritza’s—Oscar’s love interests—tragic romantic relationships in New Jersey as well as Lola’s verbally abusive relationship with her first boyfriend.
20. Interview with the author, January 2014, Barcelona, Spain.

REFERENCES


