



**Màster en Construcció i Representació  
d'Identitats Culturals**

**In the Sweet Balance of Dominican-American Identity: Diasporic  
Imaginary, Gender and Politics in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous  
Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)**

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The well-acclaimed novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by the Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz –recipient of the prestigious Pulitzer literary prize in the year 2008– narrates the breathtaking story of three generations of Dominicans –and Dominican-Americans– affected by the political instability of the Dominican Republic and the sum of anxieties that arose resulting from that episode. In fact, the novel can be interpreted as an attempt to unmask the effects of American imperialism, Spanish colonialism and Trujillo’s dictatorship in the lives of the de León family. The novel, in turn, formulates an alternative scenario in response to those anxieties generated by the well-founded fear of dictatorship, colonialism and imperialism. More specifically, the novel establishes political connections between Trujillo’s dictatorship, the legacy of an enduring colonial past promoted by the dictator’s bias for national Catholicism, normative sexualities and, ultimately, the ties with the expansion of the US imperialism under Roosevelt’s administration. The main aim of this research is to explore the interplay between politics, diaspora and gender in the construction of the hyphenated Dominican-American identity. I consider that these three thematic elements are highly intertwined in the political turmoil of the Dominican Republic which led nonetheless to the spread of Dominicans across the United States, specifically New York and New Jersey, where the novel is partly set. As a result of the combination between politics and diaspora, a hybrid, transient identity emerges which seeks to question the roots of Dominicaness, and I believe that said transient identity deserves further analysis within the yet insufficiently explored field of Dominican Studies.

The novel presents a complex picture resulting from the open wounds that Trujillo's dictatorship and the ideological nuances that it established caused in the mindset of characters such as Beli, La Inca or Abelard. Against this socio-political context, the diaspora constitutes, in itself, an alternative nationhood or, at least, a space for the re-negotiation of Dominicaness. However, the wounds inherited from the Trujillato go down into the next generation under the guise of the *fukú* that affects the lives of Oscar and Lola.<sup>1</sup> These two characters are presented in the text as diasporic subjects located in an alienating atmosphere which they find difficult to navigate. I also seek to illustrate the strategies Junot Díaz comes up with in order to show possible ways in which the characters could escape the traumatic experience of the diaspora without indulging in the longing for the romantic homeland. Such romantic portraits are generally to be found in the literature produced by the diaspora, but that, I claim, is not necessarily the case in Díaz's novel.

Junot Díaz's novel, in contrast to other accounts of the diaspora such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* or Caryl Phillips' *A State of Independence*, strives to project an image of the diasporic, transnational identity teeming with infinite possibilities in which travel and exploration are presented as the axis of social, political and identity regeneration. In this way, the world of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gives way to a multiplicity of voices, nuances of all kinds and possibilities for successful resistance to personal and political debasement in the always bumpy road of identity (de)(re)construction. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, in itself, a window to the vast landscape of human emotions: love, envy or violence, amongst others. Likewise, the novel provides an entry point to alternative

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<sup>1</sup> A term used by Junot Díaz to connote the English word "curse".

gender representations, namely masculinity, that subvert the ideas inherited from the ill-fated triangle that colonialism, dictatorship and imperialism conform.

In this research, I also analyze the reverberations of the so-called Trujillato, the dictatorship that reigned in the Caribbean island from 1930 until the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, in the lives of the de León family, who, after a period of tremendous upheaval, started a new life in a US condominium via the matriarch of the diasporic family –Beli. The novel, through the account of the construction of a home in the United States, tackles issues of agency and subjectivity to problematize the adaptability of the family living in-between two disparate cultural frameworks. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the representation of the Dominican diaspora plays an important role in that it reflects upon the anxieties that migrant characters carry from their homeland to their host community due to their having experienced lack of freedom and fear. Trujillo dictated, regulated and imposed policies whereby his office controlled the freedom of individuals to ensure US foreign investments in the island. In this Master's thesis, I have moved Trujillo's international relations –especially with the United States– to center stage in order to heighten his position as an instigator of fear. The reinforcement of a series of international policies during the Trujillato sought to perpetuate state retaliation as a form of oppression and of governance, and the novel drops several broad hints at this practice. The transnational experience that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sets in motion purports to promote a profound renegotiation of identity, provided that Trujillo's apparatus of repression seriously undermined the agency of Dominicans. This lack of agency raised the question of civil liberties and gave rise to the dynamics of exile that the novel explores when Beli moves to the United States in search of an opportunity. The diasporic experience of the de

León stems from the above mentioned conditions that created the breeding ground for mass emigration.

Additionally, in my analysis of the novel, I will put a particular emphasis on issues of gender and sexuality that deviate from the monolithic representation of sexuality not only in the Dominican Republic, but also in its diasporic representation. The use of violence played a key role in the consolidation of Trujillo's regime as the novel points out, and this is an aspect of the text to be taken into consideration for the construction and representation of masculinity in Díaz's novel. On closer inspection, it is arguable that both Dominican and Dominican diasporic gender identities are shaped by the gendered and sexual ideology constructed and circulated by the Trujillato. Such ideology is deeply rooted in the national Catholicism established by the Spaniards during colonialism. The portrayal of Oscar de León, for instance, suggests a break with the conventions of masculinity in a traditionally male-centered culture. My analysis of Oscar de León, in particular, seeks to illustrate the ongoing prejudices against non-normative masculinities, although we will also see that the Trujillato's narrow-minded ideology also causes trouble to Abelard, Beli's stepfather. The character of Oscar represents a challenge to hetero-normativity that is sensed in huge development of Oscar's personality in opposition to that of the narrator –Yunior. In my writing, I will explore the ways in which the long shadow of the Trujillato contributes to destabilizing non-normative expressions of sexuality by considering them as a serious threat to the core of Dominican masculinity.

In the process of writing this Master's thesis, I have had to face difficulties regarding the suitability of the existing secondary sources. Most of the research that has been carried out by critics and researchers in the years after the novel's publication has

concentrated on the postmodern aspects of the novel, the pastiche of genres that overlap in Junot Díaz's writing, issues of race, migration and/or the code switching phenomenon as a bridging element between two opposing linguistic realities, to name a few. All these subjects are indicative of the variety of themes explored in Díaz's novel. However, my main aim has been to explore a different aspect of the novel and not to evaluate the nature of that difference. In so doing, I have connected historical facts –the Trujillato, colonialism, US imperialism–, other literary representations of said facts, postcolonial theory in practice, transnational approaches to identity and, ultimately, gender and sexuality studies because, at large, I consider the novel to be at the crossroads of geopolitical history and modern representations of identity. I had to mingle –and struggle with– diverse critical sources in order support, intertwine and produce a demonstrative text in as meaningful a way as possible. This research project will also set the basis for my future Ph.D. thesis within the program “Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities”, in which I intend to speak at length of issues of masculinity in the literature written by Junot Díaz and other Latino writers in the United States.

### **Derek Walcott, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the Struggle for Cultural Identity**

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* opens with a section from the poem “The Schooner Flight” by the Caribbean playwright, poet and cultural emblem Derek Walcott. The enticing nuances of the poem lie in its powerful dialogic portrayal of the identity landscape of the Caribbean as a land of cultural encounters, as a site of *mélange* and, more significantly, as the hallmark of cultural hybridity in the New World. This

cultural reference foregrounds a claim for cultural visibility. In the poem, Walcott presents himself as a human being with “Dutch, nigger and English” blood running through his veins, which is his way of embracing and appropriating these cultures in an attempt to depict the complexities of Caribbean identities. Most of these complexities result from a problematic colonial past, but they also manifest themselves in another source of conflict that the novel also deals with in detail: dictatorship and its submission to alien interests, as we will see in subsequent chapters. In the novel, Junot Díaz includes echoes of the colonial legacy, besides walking the readers through his representation of the “Trujillato” and introducing them to its consequences through the term *fukú*. The poem tackles the sum of the colonial atrocities that have given rise to an identity that presents itself as nostalgic of the days “when these slums of empire was paradise” as Walcott highlights. This line from the poem is significant since Díaz describes those “slums” in Santo Domingo when the novel narrates Beli’s youth and Oscar’s return to the island. The narrative of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes reference to those “slums” also when Beli settles down in New Jersey and raises the de León family. Thus, the poem’s urban and cultural experience as well as its unique understanding of identity is transferred to the microcosm of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* at the same time that it extends it to the diasporic experience.

This connection provides guidance for the readers who will find in the story to come the diasporic experience of the de León family. Such experience represents in itself a sea of ambiguities that the line “either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” in Walcott’s poem perfectly reflects. According to anthropologist James Clifford, the diasporas “are caught up with and defined against the norms of nation-states” (Clifford 1997: 250). Díaz articulates an alternative conception of identity somehow detached from national



ties seeking to authorize and validate the constitution of the diaspora as an independent, autonomous political unit within the frame of the larger society epitomized by the United States. In the story, Oscar Lola and Beli go through different, but equally interesting, processes of self-discovery, of reconciliation with the past and of enactment of a new diasporic agency. These three –self-discovery, reconciliation and agency– are the pillars upon which the excerpt of Walcott’s poem, which Junot Díaz includes at the outset of the text, rests. The story of the *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is largely about rediscovering the world and the self anew far from “home”; in the novel, the diaspora, far from an exercise in pathos, is the celebration, the triumph of human agency over debasement and the blatant lack of democracy. The diasporic journey, though painful and uncertain, enables the de León family to experience freedom. Díaz’s representation of the diasporic experience escapes the traditional accounts of the diaspora in which the story turns the yet existing feelings of alienation, doubleness and identity fragmentation that arise in postcolonial and diasporic representations of identity into the major strength of the transnational identity that is already in the making; instead, he presents it as a tough though eventually positive, supportive and learning process in the United States. In this way, Junot Díaz grasps Derek Walcott’s “notions of cultural decolonization and the forging of an aesthetic that accepts the literary and linguistic heritage of Europe, [America] and Africa without shame or recrimination” (Edwards 1996: 24). This is reflected, on the one hand, in the oral features of African heritage that abound in the style of Junot Díaz and which contribute to its poeticity, musicality and rhythm, and, on the other hand, in the acknowledgement of American popular culture, particularly superheroes, pop culture and video games to name a few, to throw light on the cultural entanglements that Oscar experiences and which are hard to account for otherwise.

In her analysis of “The Schooner Flight” critic Mary C. Fuller suggests that in the poem the history of the Caribbean accounts for the ongoing development and transformation of Caribbean identities and its individuals in the Caribbean or elsewhere. According to the poem, the creolization of the islands and their cultural diversity have given rise to identities that are constantly in the making, thus articulating a multiplicity of voices “coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole” (qtd in Díaz 2007). Fuller explains the Caribbean melting pot in the poem as follows, locating the reader in a complex social milieu:

“The Schooner Flight” folds together local history (the collision of European and African in the Caribbean, the aftermath of a racially mixed colonial society) and mythic history –Homer’s and Vergil’s myths of national origin, *of the voyage as shaping, redemptive ordeal*. To put it differently, the poem is negotiating between local history as such and a local history –of the Caribbean or the Mediterranean– claiming universal shape, meaning, and importance. History, narratives and understandings of the past, is the method, the topic, and the crux of this poem. (Fuller 1996: 323 italics added)

Fuller’s reading of the poem binds together *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the excerpt of “The Schooner Flight” in that the former precisely gives voice to “a local history” that challenges the monolithic representation of the mournful diaspora. This may be so because the novel assumes the poem’s “local history” and turns pity into power. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, besides narrating and understanding the past, provides insights into the construction of a vigorous cultural identity through the representation of Oscar de León –the present and the future of Dominicaness– in opposition to Beli –the past–, which is necessary to understand why the story develops in the direction of forging a new model of Dominican identity. The narrative thread of Díaz’s novel empowers Oscar to appropriate his roots and redefine them in-between the United States and the Dominican Republic.

Additionally, the poem expresses the yearning for identity and, again, “I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” becomes relevant as the novel explores Oscar’s quest for identity in terms of Dominicaness, and in a foreign nation, namely the United States. The poem raises the issue of doubleness that “either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” purports to put forward. In relation to this, Linda Hutcheon observes: “Doubleness is the essence of migrant experience. Caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures, the writer negotiates a new literary space” (qtd in Král 2009: 43). Both Walcott and Díaz negotiate such a space where Shabine and Oscar strive to cultivate a distinctive ethos seeking to arise an alternative identity consciousness. Hence, the straightforward connection between two characters that face similar challenges and difficulties deeply-rooted in the aftermaths of colonialism. In the poem, Shabine describes the many changes that colonialism brought about –his concerns– and the extent to which those changes in the islands have affected his subjectivity and perception of the world: “they had started to poison my soul” (qtd in Díaz 2007). Shabine claims his Caribbean roots, despite being a thrice born person that makes explicit reference to his Dutch, English and African blood, and how these three roots have long been poisoned by the influence of colonial superstructures in the region that have likewise imposed the creolization of the Caribbean. Shabine introduces himself as a “red nigger who love the sea”, thus leaving the door open to the dynamics of exile and relocation as Shabine’s quest for identity represents a challenge that transcends national boundaries. This is exactly what happens with Oscar de León in Junot Díaz’s text when Beli relocates herself in Paterson (New Jersey) and starts a family. Oscar grows up with the imperative need to learn more –for Beli tells very little about the past– about his ancestors’ cultural sources and, therefore, he initiates a personal journey and travels back and forth between the United States and the

Dominican Republic in order to stop being “nobody” in the United States and to join “a nation”, if metaphorically at least. Oscar’s identity is not entirely dependent upon the US cultural milieu. Neither does he ever feels fully Dominican during his long-stay in the island and very often he refuses to perform his masculinity in the terms his Dominican peers expect from him. In this sense, Oscar fails to join the Dominican nation the way Dominican males do. This is a question I will analyze in chapter four of my Masters’ thesis. The character of Oscar appears anxious and trapped in between two worlds, two mismatching identities, out of the dialogue between which he needs to accommodate his own. The process of becoming a writer is the way Oscar will choose to develop his identity and the education he receives enables him to realize that he himself can construct the world that shapes his self. If Shabine “had a sound colonial education”, Oscar, on the contrary, has a sound imperial education –Rutgers University– that works as an identity marker.

The poetic voice of Derek Walcott points out to the instability of the Caribbean as a pushing factor for migration; Junot Díaz explores that migratory movement by recalling Beli’s early days in Santo Domingo. Beli, the matriarch of the story, suffers the political persecution of the Trujillato, thus becoming a victim of the poisoned political landscape of the island. The political dimension of the novel determines the fate of Beli in the Dominican Republic for she becomes “nobody” in the nation she grew up in. Out of the cast of characters, she experiences more than anyone else the brutality of the Trujillo apparatus. State-violence destabilizes Beli in that she no longer feels one-to-one correspondence between her culture and her status as a Dominican citizen. The representation of the dictatorship along with the aftermaths of colonialism is central to the plot of the story.

## **Chapter Two: Political Nightmares in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.**

This chapter aims to analyze the political dimension of the novel and the way it represents the reverberations of the political sphere in the life of the de León family. The novel tiptoes around the tumultuous history of the Dominican Republic and focuses, on the one hand, on the struggle for survival in the United States, and, on the other, on the psychological development of the characters. It is inevitable to relate their lives to the Trujillato as that is identified in the text as the root of the major disadvantages characters face in the microcosm of the novel. Since the political influences the personal, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* displays the consequences of the political nightmares on the island ranging from the all-powerful and ever-present figure of Trujillo to the escape from the island or the de León's difficult early days in the United States where they find themselves part of a racialized and highly stereotyped minority group.

The examination of the way Trujillo and his dictatorship is represented both in Díaz's novel and in some other literary accounts of the regime is, primarily, the focus of the first section of this Master's thesis, "Trujillo: The Master of the Plantation". I combine the description of certain key historical facts –including the increasing migratory flow that the political chaos and popular unrest unleashed– with Junot Díaz's engagement with it in his fictional representation of the regime. This first section is key to understanding the origins of Dominican-American identity within a transnational context. I will devote this section to the description of the process of construction and the subsequent representation of Dominican-American identity in the novel.

The second section of this chapter seeks to establish an analogy between colonialism and dictatorship. There exists a strong connection between both forms of “governance” that demand a close analysis. The use of violence, fear and repression are probably the most outstanding features they share; however, these are not the only ones because in both cases –colonialism and dictatorship– there is a paroxysm of nationalist feeling paradoxically combined with the influence of foreign ideas dictated by the United States. An influence so pervasive it may well end up with the replacement of one culture by another; hence, the homogenization of cultural and ideological patterns sets the basis of cultural continuation. The novel strongly suggests that dictatorship is, after all, the continuation of colonialism. Colonial rule has long inscribed the psychology of oppression upon the colonized and so too would the dictatorships that ensued. Both stances represent blatant attempts to downsize democracies and civil rights. Colonialism has unfortunately traditionally evolved into dictatorships –which, in itself, speaks eloquently of the effects of the “white man’s burden”. The novel provides ample examples in support of this idea. The so-called *fukú* suggests the ties between colonialism and dictatorship and the consequent weakness of agency in the citizens that live under those regimes. If the *fukú* is a perpetuation of misfortunes along a family line, so is dictatorship the extension of colonialism in the body politics.

Very often, the desire for freedom simmers in countries where young and emerging democracies go adrift. The fictional world of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is not an exception and the thorough description of Trujillo’s apparatus and its indecent accumulation of power are a good example of it. Therefore, it is pertinent to look at the strategies the novel deploys, on the authorial level, the level of narration, and the level of diegetic characters, in order to confront the authority of the dictator so as to

achieve and promote agency. Migration can often be a partial solution to the problem in that individuals experience a freedom in their host countries they were deprived of at home, and the diaspora can provide a supportive environment for the achievement of that goal. Consequently, the people living in diaspora can become –and that is what Junot Díaz’s text seems to suggest– a pressure group. Their return to the island proves how characters end up achieving agency and provides insights about how the diaspora can articulate a response to the socio-political entanglement promoted by the regime. Junot Díaz portrays the diaspora as a celebration of agency rather than as a personal failure for having abandoned their homeland. Home, after all, is wherever the individual develops himself/herself to its fullest.

### **Trujillo: The Master of the Plantation**

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* harshly criticizes the so-called “Trujillato” through the denunciatory voice of Díaz. The literary world of the novel engages in conversation with the first, second and third generations of the de León family, while reconstructing some instances of the most harmful –and lasting– episode of Dominican history: the dictatorship. Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic with an iron fist for thirty-one years (1930-1961). The power and influence he exerted over the nation shattered the political agency of Dominicans and, consequently, Dominicans’ sense of displacement grew stronger, mainly because their chances to promote changes on a large scale in the country were doomed to failure. Trujillo’s regime, as Díaz illustrates in the novel, would track down “rebellious” citizens relentlessly. This is an aspect the story explores through the de León family, to some extent a dysfunctional

family whose core members are still trapped in between the multiplicity of unresolved conflicts ranging from the aftermaths of dictatorship in their mindsets to the uncanny aspects of their American experience, their temporary returns to the island or the need to move forward by making a culture of their own. Much to the Dominicans chagrin, the long shadow of Trujillo is still present in the Dominican mindset. The diaspora, which partly stems from the dictatorship, attests to this. Junot Díaz includes the controversial dictator in the novel to pinpoint the degree of nepotism, the political corruption that Walcott also introduces in “The Schooner Flight”, and the harassing and threatening policies of the regime exemplified in Beli’s bashing. These reasons pushed not only Beli in Díaz’s fictional representation of the regime, but also tens of thousands of Dominicans to the United States industrial settings –New York and New Jersey, for the most part– in search of the future that had been stolen from them. Díaz himself is a product of the diasporic generation he wittily pays tribute to in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. As such, he shows his credentials as an indirect witness of a history he never lived through but that, nonetheless, has marked his personal development for he himself grew up with rigidity.<sup>2</sup>

Some prominent literary figures including Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (*Galíndez*, 1990), Julia Alvarez (*In the Time of the Butterflies*, 1994), Edwige Danticat (*The Farming of Bones*, 1998), Mario Vargas Llosa (*The Feast of the Goat*, 2001) or Carmen Rivera (*Dictator: The Downfall of the Dominican Dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina*, 2008) have fictionalized the atrocities of the dictatorship, and have likewise contributed to keeping a record of the dictator in the Dominican imaginary. Each of the mentioned literary accounts throws new light on the multi-faceted figure of

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<sup>2</sup> On the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2013 Junot Díaz gave a public lecture at Powell’s bookstore in Portland (OR) where he explained his experience growing up in the United States and I echo his words here.



Trujillo and focuses on key historical facts, thus corroborating the mischief of the regime and the consequences of the crimes committed by ‘El Jefe’ in the Dominican social fabric. For example, in these novels, the ordeal of the Dominican people is represented through the genocide of Haitians in 1937, the story of the Mirabal sisters – political dissidents who persistently campaigned against Trujillo and were assassinated by the regime– or the efforts of the shrinking opposition towards the end of the dictatorship to stake a claim on democracy. These novels and their academic and critical analysis alike have thoroughly commented on the ‘theatricality’ of the regime in order to discredit Trujillo’s authority. In line with this, Schlote states:

Given the dictator’s distinct penchant for theatrical farce, can we then assume that the dramatic genre may be more appropriate in regard to revealing and exploring this particular facet of Trujillo and his dictatorship? Do the performative and narrative modes of drama provide more effective ways of destabilizing the authoritative figure of the dictator? (Schlote 2010: 70-71)

Given the theatricality of the public staging of the dictatorship, most of the aforementioned writers uphold the belief that (historical) fiction and drama are the genres that can best narrate the horrors said dictatorship entails. The novels listed above are the most significant recent foreign contributions to the cultivation of the “Trujillato genre”<sup>3</sup>, whereas the novel by Junot Díaz is the most acclaimed –and successful– text among those written by Dominicans.

The representation of the “Trujillato” dictatorship in literature tends to associate Trujillo with the supernatural and with evil. Díaz describes Trujillo’s supernatural traits

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<sup>3</sup> Ana Gallego Cuiñas in “El Trujillato por tres Plumas foráneas: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julia Alvarez”, Carmen Méndez García in “La Huida del Mordor Caribeño: El Exilio y la Diáspora Dominicana en *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” or Adam Lifshy in “Indeterminacy and the Subversive Representations of the Trujillato” are examples of the academic work devoted to the Trujillato genre.

the following way: “[a]t the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron’s evil was taken by ‘a great wind’ and neatly ‘blown away,’ with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too exotic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after death his evil *lingered*.” (Díaz 2007: 156). The title of Vargas Llosa’s novel, for example, also relates Trujillo to evil as “goat” is a nickname for the devil. These connections may be so partly because of the cruel nature of the tyranny exercised by the dictator, and also because of his hardiness as he managed to emerge unscathed from adverse circumstances such as prostate cancer. Díaz’s literary style, on the contrary, moderates the devastating effects of Trujillo’s policies as well as his toughness, while it finds effective ways to make him “bearable”. Thus, although Díaz moderates the impact on the reader of the brutal actions of the dictator through *code switching*<sup>4</sup>, the long shadow of Trujillo’s rule tinges with bitterness the memories of those who, like Abelard or Beli, have experienced the perturbation, intimidation and violence of the regime. Additionally, way after the regime, Oscar stumbles on the ideological consequences of a dictatorship deeply embedded already in the gendered identities of the Dominican Republic and the representation of the diaspora. The text problematizes with Oscar’s abiding male feebleness and along with the absence of a marked hypermasculinity in him confirms that Oscar is likely to become the target of criticism. These issues unmask the dreadful nature of Trujillo and the effect of the said actions endow the novel with a tenser prose by creating a pitch dark atmosphere where the psychology of fear comes into scene and goes beyond the dictator’s passing.

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<sup>4</sup> In “Los Negocios de una Identidad: Herida, Trauma y Fantasía en Junot Díaz” Marta del Pozo Ortea says Junot Díaz switches from English into Spanish so as to smooth violent situations or linguistic undertones in English.

In regard to Trujillo's death, criticism portrays his death as nearly unbelievable in the way it has been rendered in the literary accounts of the regime since "there was a mystical awe surrounding the dictator, as if Trujillo's authority transcended corporeal limits" (Derby 1999: 92). In fact, his assassination, apparently at the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency, confirmed that Trujillo was mortal and his regime had temporal limits, thus putting momentarily an end to decades of political mischief, violation of human rights and close surveillance.<sup>5</sup> This was just a chimera because Balaguer, Trujillo's heir, would stick to the policies carried out by the dictator in the past and the glimpse at a better future thus faded away. Interestingly, the construction of characters in the novel mirrors these fears and exemplifies the well-founded concerns about the political sphere through the representation of the diaspora in the text. More specifically, Díaz resorts to Beli and Abelard to comment on the psychological distress that arises from the sum of anxieties and tensions during the regime. Doing so allows Díaz to enquire into the aftermaths of Trujillo's dictatorship, and through the depiction of three generations to whom the traumatic experience of the Dominican Republic represents paradoxically union with the diaspora and disjunction with the state. This strategy illustrates that corruption was commonplace during the Trujillo era and, what is worse, had been perpetuated and enshrined in the state structures emerging from the dictatorship. Despite all the nuances, the novel celebrates the myriad of alternatives that the diasporic journey offers to the diasporic subjects after having struggled hard to stay afloat in a complex context.

Very often Díaz makes the readership aware of the inaccuracies his version of the "Trujillato" may contain because his is just a story that empowers the imagination,

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<sup>5</sup> Joaquín Antonio Balaguer Ricardo swept into power after Trujillo's death. Balaguer was already a member of Trujillo's government and gave continuation to Trujillo's legacy in the Dominican Republic.

creativity and clever mischief. He notes: “[a]nd now we arrive at the strangest part of our *tale* [...] But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived” (Díaz 2007: 149 italics added). Even though Díaz does not intend to attract attention to Trujillo, he certainly brings him to bear in his fictional rendering of the Dominican Republic and only Trujillo’s presence triggers respect and fear. The narrative bracketing technique<sup>6</sup> along with the code switching and the stream-of-consciousness Díaz uses in the novel inscribe not only the presence of Trujillo, but also the impact of his brutal actions on the cast of characters, expressed both in English and in Spanish. Marta del Pozo Ortea explains the relation between the metonymic function of language and said code switching through the lens of Lacan’s psychoanalysis:

Dicha función metonímica del lenguaje también se observa en el fenómeno del code switching en el protagonista. Esto parece atender al objetivo de reflejar las propias disonancias internas del narrador, los saltos lingüísticos representando saltos entre culturas y como comenta Junot, los efectos de la imposición de otra lengua. (Del Pozo Ortea 2011: 2-3)

These literary devices stress both the fear of the Dominican nation and Trujillo’s desire to be omnipresent. Junot Díaz uses footnotes extensively to inform the readers of Trujillo’s activity thoroughly. In so doing, Díaz requires an extra effort from the readers because, in the process of documenting the regime, Díaz sets into motion another story that runs parallel to the lines of the novel. The core of this parallel story centers on the

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<sup>6</sup> The story of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does not follow a chronological order. Junot Díaz steps back and forth in time. Díaz moves from one character onto another in each of the sections in order to focalize the story from different perspectives. Although Yunior is the principal narrator, Lola, Oscar’s sister, also takes on such a role.

elements that perpetuated the image of the dictator in the Dominican imaginary. So, for instance, Junot Díaz refers to the fact that Trujillo even renamed the capital city after himself, as well as other significant places all over the island in order to exhibit his accumulation of power “[f]amous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Gúzman, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo)” (Díaz 2007: 2). There exist, however, several reasons behind his immense accumulation of power and wealth –by the time he died he was one of the richest men in the world. The fact that the United States provided generous support to Trujillo for him to take control over the nation made everything easier for the dictator. As a consequence, he increased his military budget and, hence, his power notably. Owing to this support, the opposing political parties disappeared in the blink of an eye, and Trujillo’s military apparatus downsized any attempt at democratization by subduing the whole island.

Trujillo was overall deeply committed to ensuring the continuity in the island of the US investments in sugar and corn. He strictly enforced the “Good Neighbor Policy” made effective during Roosevelt’s administration in an attempt to satisfy the US demands to pay the external debt of the Dominican Republic. The sugar and cornfields perceived by Trujillo as his way to guarantee the help of the powerful northern neighbor symbolize, for the Dominican civilians, crime and enslavement for once dragged into the fields by Trujillo’s police almost nobody would return and account for it –Beli’s survival is rendered almost supernatural. Díaz recreates the *modus operandi* of the regime as follows: “[a]nd where were the Mirabal Sisters murdered? In a canefield, of course. And their bodies were put in a car and a crash was simulated!” (Díaz 2007: 2).

Díaz also warns the readers of the dangerous fields as follows: “[a]s some of you know, canefields are no fucking joke, and even the cleverest of adults can get mazed in their endlessness, only to reappear months later as a cameo of bones” (Díaz 2007: 149). The fields may also represent political disunity, censorship and overall the brutality of the regime because it was in the fields where Trujillo’s office would administer “justice”. The national disunity becomes conspicuous in the very few rebellious attempts that the novel depicts in a nation that is falling apart due to the regime’s systematic denial of civil liberties. This lack of liberties manifests itself in the use of violence to eradicate democratic claims and freedom of speech as happens to Abelard when he shows his disagreement with Trujillo. Significantly, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, most of the violent scenes take place in the fields and at dusk, thus penetrating into the darkness of the dictatorship. I would argue that darkness carries significant connotations in that it represents the *mise-en-scene* of the regime and its *modus operandi*. Consider, in support of my assumption, the following scene when Beli returns to life: “[t]he wind! But she had only a second to savor it, for just then an unelectrified truck burst out of the *darkness* in a roar of gears” (Díaz 2007: 150 italics added). Darkness itself guarantees the secrecy and the anonymity of the regime’s agents and of those who fund it.

Trujillo was a wage earner of capitalism, and therefore at the feet of high-net-worth entities, however ironic it may sound as regards his ruthless nature. His iron fist provided, at least in the eyes of foreign investors, “political stability” in the area and their investments were the source of Trujillo’s wealth accumulation. This would happen precisely at the expense of freedom and the loss of civil rights. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reflects the anxieties resulting from the Trujillato, and Díaz describes it as follows:

In some ways living in Santo Domingo during the Trujillato was a lot like being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode that Oscar loved so much, the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike power rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world, a town called Peaksville. The white kid is vicious and random and all the people in the “community” live in the straight terror of him, denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat in order not to be the person he maims or, more ominously, sends to the corn (Díaz 2007: 224)

Isolation is probably the term that best defines Dominican helplessness and Trujillo’s relentless dominion. In the novel, Trujillo appears as a miserable being who shows no remorse for his brutal actions, and the less so for kidnapping national sovereignty and the dreams of an entire nation. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does not aim to provide a hero confronting the legacy of Trujillo –the antagonist– in defiantly challenging terms. Despite Díaz’s knowledge about comic books and heroes, the character construction of the novel refuses to incorporate patterns of that kind of texts and does not provide Trujillo with the well-deserved superhero to confront him, the supervillain. The “supernatural” elements attributed to Trujillo may have well deserved an opponent of the same kind to counteract his tyranny. Instead, Junot Díaz constructs the character of Yunior to narrate the distressing effects of the pathos caused by Trujillo. The novel recalls the stifling atmosphere of those days, the longings of a generation crying for freedom and the oppressiveness of being a young person in a nation directed by gangsters. Consider this passage:

You ven acá, Beli muttered under her breath. You. Beli had the inchoate longings of nearly every adolescence escapist, of an entire generation, but I ask you: So fucking what? No amount of wishful thinking was changing the cold hard fact that she was a teenage girl living in the Dominican Republic of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated. This was a country, a society, that had been designed to be virtually escape-proof. Alcatraz of the Antilles. There weren’t any Houdini holes in that Plátano Curtain. Options are as rare as Tainos and for irascible darkskinned flacas of

modest means they were rarer still. (If you want to cast her restlessness in a broader light: she was suffering the same suffocation that was asphyxiating a whole generation of young Dominicans. Twenty-odd years of the Trujillato had guaranteed that. *Hers was the generation that would launch the Revolution, but which for the moment was turning blue for want of air.* (Díaz 2007: 80 italics added)

The construction of characters in the novel reflects the repressive ideological framework of the dictatorship and the island's blurred emotional landscape. Beli is one of the victims of Trujillo's regime and the long shadow of the dictatorship lasts longer in her heart for her only way out was to emigrate to the United States. She suffers from shell shock<sup>7</sup> and cannot express her concerns neither to Lola nor to Oscar, and La Inca just mentions Beli had a shocking end in the Dominican Republic when asked by Lola and Oscar about Beli's secrecy, thus generating confusion in Lola and Oscar. Only when she was in hospital being treated for cancer, would she stop closing off her emotions for she no longer can store her traumatic story. The dictator's imprint manifests itself in how Beli treats Lola and Oscar, who are, in turn, the recipients of all the stored-up hatred of the last decades.

Ultimately, the representation of Trujillo foregrounds the struggle of the family to wipe out the actual events that took place both during the Trujillato and Beli's days in Santo Domingo. The influence of Trujillo is reflected in the somehow poisoned relationship between Beli and her adult children, Lola and Oscar, in that Beli mimics certain repressive practices she herself experienced in the past. Beli's impossibility to

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<sup>7</sup> Shell shock is the reaction of some soldiers in World War I to the trauma of battle. It is a reaction to the intensity of the bombardment and fighting that produced a helplessness appearing variously as panic and being scared, or flight, an inability to reason, sleep, walk or talk. Source: Wikipedia. I think this term may apply to Beli's state-of-mind in the novel when it comes to expressing her account of the Trujillato in her own words.



eradicate the past is what actually keeps Trujillo alive in her mind in the long run. This idea will be further explored in the section “Migration and Identity Crisis” of my Master’s Thesis.

### **Craving for Political Freedom: Colonial Heritage, Dictatorship and Imperialism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.**

Díaz compels the readers to see that in the novel capitalist interests dictate our protagonists’ fate. For the sake of contextualizing the misfortunes of the de León family, the narrative voice offers insightful views on the atrocities of the regime. Thus the microcosm of the novel illustrates in what ways the Dominican diaspora responds primarily, but not exclusively, to a political entanglement. This literary device reproduces the side effects of the colonial era in Trujillo’s Dominican Republic during roughly more than three decades. If the previous section focused on the representation of Trujillo’s dictatorship and of its far reaching consequences in the (re)construction of Dominican identity abroad, this section aims to document the bonds between the colonial heritage of the Spaniards on the island and Trujillo’s dictatorship. I agree with those academics<sup>8</sup> who claim that the colonial experience is directly responsible for the nature of the social fabric that arose in those countries after independence. In the case of the Dominican Republic, Spanish rule promoted a nationalist, fiercely ethnocentric cosmovision that found its most bloody expression in the massacre of Haitians. The novel recalls this genocide and compares it to its 1937 repetition at the hands of Trujillo

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<sup>8</sup> See Fitzgibbon 1960; Pulley 1965; Derby 1999 and 2000; Gallego 2005; Patterson 2006; Lifshy 2008; Mahler 2010; Schlote 2010; Machado 2011; and Méndez 2011.

as an instance of his racial prejudice against Haitians. In line with this, critic Richard F. Patterson establishes an analogy between Trujillo and two world-renowned dictators like Franco and Hitler. Trujillo considered the Haitians a serious threat for the values that the regime embraced in terms of race: “like Franco, he could purport to defend Catholicism against vodoun and other African practices, and like Hitler, he could purify the race. It hardly mattered that the ‘purification’, in light of the mixed racial composition of Dominican themselves, would be a farce” (Patterson 2006: 225-6).

The links between colonial madness and dictatorial nationalism resonate in Junot Díaz’s text through its textualizing of the arrival of the Europeans at the very outset of the novel: “[i]t is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world” (Díaz 2007: 1). In this way, Yuniors simultaneously situates the readers in a (post)colonial context, while he informs them of the weight of colonialism in the story he is just starting to tell. Even though the narration shifts from the Dominican Republic to the United States and is, therefore, decentered, the narration offers a vast landscape of violence attached to both territories in order to portray the troubled agency of the protagonists –Oscar, Beli, Lola, La Inca, Abelard and Yuniors himself, the main narrative voice. The United States also contributed to destabilizing the course of political affairs in the already badly damaged Dominican Republic. Researchers have argued (Pulley 1965; Derby 1999) –as I have stated in the previous section– that the United States’ concerns about the security of its investments in the island had contributed to the consolidation of the dictatorship in the long run. If the United States supported the Dominican Republic materially, it is the deeply-rooted colonial ideology, that shapes the reinforcement of Catholic values, Trujillo’s ideological exponent. The erasing of the Dominican Republic’s connections with the

African continent, something that Yunió's voice brings back at the very beginning of the novel when he exposes the readers to the Tainos,<sup>9</sup> confirms Trujillo's obsession with the European root. In "The Dictator's Two Bodies: Hidden Powers of State in the Dominican Imagination" Lauren Derby writes at great length of the Spanish seed in Dominican culture and, more importantly, of how Trujillo appropriated the legacy of the Spaniards in order to establish a distinction between Dominicans and Haitians, or, as Trujillo conceived this, between the civilized world and the barbarians when, in fact, there were stronger connections between them than Trujillo may have wished:

Dominican religious practice is nominally catholic, but has been deeply embossed by the Afro-Catholic religion of *vodoun* from neighboring Haiti. Thus Trujillo may represent the Spanish-Catholic face of saint authority, while the *muchachito* [kid] corresponds to the potent yet invisible powers of *vodoun*. While the Dominican Republic and Haiti share a common history of slavery, the fact that freed men outnumbered slaves during most of the colonial period on the eastern side of the island meant that Dominicans came to identify as Spanish Catholics, even if extensive racial mixture meant that African cultural practices were widely diffused. (Derby 1999: 97).

The past of Spanish colonialism further shaped the ideological framework of the dictatorial regime by incorporating very specific outlooks on class, gender and race issues. The United States specifically aided Trujillo financially to enforce –and impose– a colonial pattern in the Dominican Republic necessary, in their opinion, to reinforce the geopolitical position of the United States in the area. Having said this, it is important to note that one of the fundamental reasons for Trujillo's establishment as the head of the Dominican nation state is symptomatic of the rhizomic nature of the US imperial power

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<sup>9</sup> Tainos were the native inhabitants of the island before colonization took place along with their extermination.

under Roosevelt's administration.<sup>10</sup> The other major concern lies paradoxically in the dictator's commitment to white supremacy inherited from the colonial encounter with the Spanish; hence, the otherization of Haitians along with the erasure of a significant part of the Dominicans' major cultural source: black Africa. The sum of these issues affects each generation of Dominicans depicted in the novel to a greater or lesser extent, and this reflects in the growing anxiety of Abelard and La Inca, in particular. Exile and emigration constitute a political diasporic population whose experience is both internal and external to the Dominican Republic because their lives exemplify the evolution of a nation that goes adrift.

Most critical analyses of dictatorship in the Dominican Republic as a site of authoritarianism and lack of agency (Derby 1999 and 2000; Patterson 2006; Pulley 1965; Schlote 2010) identify the US as instrumental in consolidating one of the most grievous episodes of Dominican history, while they tend to disregard the role of Spanish colonialism. It is my contention that this generates an incomplete narrative of the historical event because Trujillo's administration embodies the continuation of an exploitative model used by the Spaniards in the past. This consideration implies that the Trujillato responds to a series of unresolved historical processes whereby issues of class, gender and political positioning gain ground substantially. Interestingly, the plot of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is at the crossroads of colonialism, dictatorship and the role of US imperialism during and after the Trujillato. In Díaz's novel, the *fukú* –despite it being a generic term to connote the word “curse”– specifically points to the colonial period and identifies it as the real turning point for the Dominican Republic, the moment in time when it starts its way towards becoming a

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<sup>10</sup> The rhizome is a term introduced by Bill Ashcroft in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* and which refers to the invisibility of power structures.

nation in the ditch with a dwindling democracy that, in much the same way as colonialism, only pursues to secure the status-quo of the elites. In order to analyze this view, we should consider the impact of Spanish colonialism in Latin America and the subsequent blurred image of incipient attempts to normalize institutions and political organizations in the postcolonial era. In “Dictatorship and Democracy in Latin America” Russell H. Fitzgibbon argues: “[t]he intricate problem of Latin American dictatorship and democracy must be examined with a historical telescope in order even to approximate to any contemporary understanding of it” (1972: 49). Fitzgibbon suggests that dictatorships cannot be analyzed in isolation. In connection with Fitzgibbon’s insights, I highlight that the facts that have triggered the military government of Trujillo bear an intimate relation to the values inherited from the colonial encounter with the Spaniards. The outcome resulting said encounter manifests itself in the construction of Dominican national identity mostly through the lens of the dictator, which is precisely the monolithic identity that the characters combat.

Moreover, at the root of the whole issue, it deserves special attention the influence of the United States on the decision making process of Trujillo’s administration. This has set the basis upon which the mass exile of Dominicans to the United States rests –to be analyzed in chapter three of this research– and this, together with the persistent influence of the colonial ideology that was embedded in Trujillo’s political agenda, constitutes the breeding ground of Trujillo’s iron fist. As a consequence, the Dominican Republic failed to embrace the needed diversification in society to face the new challenges and the prosperity that the United States, as a center of power, may grant to prospective immigrants. The connections among these three forms of illegitimate power –colonialism, dictatorship and imperialism– downsize the

long for democracy and, additionally, cause alienation, disorientation and distress in the social fabric of the countries that fall into their clutches, as the novel illustrates. According to the novel, there seems to be little space for independence of mind in Trujillo's Dominican Republic: "[t]he Reign of Trujillo was not the best time to be a lover of Ideas, not the best time to be engaging in parlor debate" (Díaz 2007: 214). The insurmountable obstacles met by alternatives other than Trujillo's ethos demonstrate that subversive activity, as the Mirabal sisters attempted at the expense of their lives, was the only way to stake a claim for the restoration of freedom in a hopeless nation.

In the above quotation Fitzgibbon encourages an in-depth historical investigation. Such research may throw light on the problematic political life that the novel presents under the guise of the diaspora. In "Colonialism and Development: A Comparative Analysis of Spanish and British Colonies" Lange, Mahoney and vom Hau claim that "the identity of the colonizing nation explains variation in postcolonial development" (2006: 1413). The same article continues describing the Spanish settlements in the New World, providing an overall picture of the state of the societies colonized by Spain when colonialism supposedly came to an end –mostly to be substituted by the control of US imperialism–; the text speaks tellingly for the representation of the Trujillato in the novel: "[m]ore extensive Spanish colonialism produced predatory states and dysfunctional markets, and it also left behind highly stratified societies" (Lange, Mahoney, vom Hau 2006: 1414). Particularly, *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* engages with the stratification of society in the narration of multiple social events hosted by the dictator in which the reader witnesses the upper-class' feasts through the eyes of Abelard, whose access is predicated upon his status and position as "a brilliant doctor" (Díaz 2007: 213). It is only through Abelard that Trujillo

comes into scene, thus showing that Trujillo would only rub shoulders with the upper-classes in contrast to the scene when Trujillo's officers show up in La Inca's property – she lived in a working-class neighborhood—to threaten Beli. Moreover, the readers can find another example of class contrast in Lola's failed attempt to fit in the school to which La Inca sends her. This instance highlights the aforementioned social stratification, which is, so to say, a feature inherited from colonialism, enforced by Trujillo's regime and, seemingly, still persistent in Dominican society despite Trujillo's passing:

I have mixed feelings about the school. For one thing, it's improved my Spanish a lot. The----- Academy is a private school, a Carol Morgan wannabe filled with people my tío Carlos Moya calls los hijos de mami y papi. And then there's me. If you think it was tough being a goth in Paterson, try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in DR. You will never meet bitchier girls in your whole life. They whisper about me to death. Someone else would have a nervous breakdown, but after Wildwood I'm not so brittle. (Díaz 2007: 71)

More importantly, these scenes walk the reader through the landscape of violence because it was during those feasts that Trujillo would show his skills both at brainwashing people of his interest and at intimidating potential victims, respectively. For instance, Abelard's fall from grace provides valuable information on the level of institutional corruption and of individual helplessness in Trujillo's Dominican Republic for he was accused of being a "homosexual and a Communist" (Díaz 2007: 239) when, in fact, he was trying to defend the honor of his daughter. Abelard had absolutely no opportunity to appeal for justice because "there was no outcry in the papers, no actions among the civil rights groups, no opposition parties rallying to the cause [...] there was only Trujillo" (Díaz 2007: 247). This instance is symptomatic of the individual

helplessness. Additionally, the crop fields, where most of the physical violence in the novel is conducted, point the reader to the dysfunctional markets Lange, Mahoney and vom Hau refer to and to which Junot Díaz adds on an extra dysfunctionality resulting from a “rigidly hierarchical society in which the majority of the population is dependent on a small elite” (Lange et al 2006: 1416). The structures of power endorsed by colonialism and the Trujillato present resemblances that have recorded a well-orchestrated and consistent plundering of sovereignty over the years.

In an interview conducted by Diógenes Cespedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, Junot Díaz talks about the role of the writer in transcending the boundaries of the literary text, and hence, about the function of literature in creating spaces for profound reflection. In so doing, Díaz comes to express his engagement with issues of a political nature in order to raise a political consciousness on insufficiently explored aspects of the political sphere in the Dominican Republic:

I’m one of those people who not only wants to tell a story. I also want to break the rules. People tell you, “you can’t write a political story.” “I don’t write politics.” You’ve heard that from writers? Well, that’s not totally me. I have an agenda to write politics without letting the reader think it is political. That’s my game plan for every story. So, if I’m going to talk about self-hatred, I just don’t want a nice story. I want to know what else I can get out of this. I’ve got to be able to get more out of this. You can’t just get a nice little tale. So, I sit down to open people to discussion and criticism, and I like implicating myself, my privileges. (2000: 901-902)

Junot Díaz draws on the three generations that are portrayed in the novel to comment on the bridging elements among the aforementioned forms of illegitimate governance. In this way, the narrative thread interweaves their immediate consequences on the psychological construction of Díaz’s characters. These forms of power –colonialism, dictatorship and imperialism– undermine the will of groups of people that elites have



excluded from the construction of the national identity and of the state; hence, the alienation of the characters in the novel –this is so especially in the case of Beli. In the novel, emigration constitutes the tangible reality of the estrangement from the political realm described in the text, and perhaps more importantly, of the disagreement with the social fabric that arose from a misconception of the role of the state, which repeatedly failed to guarantee civil rights on the island. One proof in support of my assumption lies in the fact that the de León family would return to the Dominican Republic, as most of the diasporic population, only for vacations and with the impossibility of permanent return given the state of the country. Díaz observes:

Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its *expelled* children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year's cadenas and paquetes, and pilots for their planes –overburdened beyond belief– and for themselves; restaurants, bars, clubs, theaters, malecones, beaches, resorts, hotels, motels, extra rooms, barrios, colonias, campos, ingenious swarm with quisqueyanos from world over. Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home! (2007: 271 italics added)

Despite the slight improvements in the normalization of democracy as the axis of society, the de León never settle back again. This is an aspect that the novel hints at when Lola and Oscar spend some time with La Inca. Their belonging to the diaspora illustrates, therefore, that an alternative nation has been constructed over the years whereby the Dominican Republic occupies, despite the chaos, a central space, but as an antagonist figure, however odd it may sound. The temporary return to the island is what actually allows the diasporic population to be part of an active network that accounts for the longings of a group of people who struggle to keep their Dominicaness regardless of the geographical distance and the somehow abstract barrier placed between them, as

diasporic subjects, and the Dominican Republic itself. Therefore, the diaspora constitutes itself as a space to find release from the constraints of a life in the margins of Dominican society in that it enables the diasporic population represented in the novel to experience a fate other than that determined by the limited ideological world fiercely endorsed by the super structure of the regime.

### Chapter Three: Identities in Motion

One of the enticing features of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* lies in the transnational representation of Dominican identity in the United States. In regard to this, Junot Díaz, through the narration of the events affecting the lives of Beli, Oscar, Lola and Yunió, directs the readers to the interstitial, fluid space in which identity is negotiated. This negotiation focuses primarily on the distinctions in the modes of representation of the three generations that are depicted in the novel. These distinctions imply the (re)(de)construction of Dominicanity given that the narrator incorporates a series of nuances from the host society –American popular culture– and rejects some others from the Dominican sphere, namely the lack of a democratic culture, that help distinguish the diaspora from the nation. In so doing, the novel maps out a new terrain seeking to provide an entry point to the new challenges that Dominicanity is facing with a significant amount of Dominicans living in diaspora.

The portrayal of three generations and, therefore, three various, but equally engaging, realities raises the question of how they all would fit together in order to provide a consistent picture of Dominicanity. As we have seen in chapter two, the construction of Dominican identity over the years has been favored, for the most part, by the influence of colonialism, dictatorship and imperialism. The sum of the three has given rise to a transnational identity, whose center is based in the United States. Far from reading that historical fact as unequivocally problematic, the narration of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* highlights the facts that trigger in the characters the need to start the journey towards the rediscovery of Dominicanity, thus providing an arena for the further development of identity. For the sake of achieving such a goal, Junot

Díaz intertwines the role of migration as a utopian space in the mind of Beli, the matriarch, with that of the regime.

The first section of this chapter is devoted to analyzing this issue along with the violence that arose as a consequence of Beli's resistance to giving away her agency. Moreover, the migratory journey of Beli allows the readers to witness her experience as a racialized minority living in the margins of society in the United States. Hence, issues of race, class and gender come to the fore in the reshaping of Dominicaness. This chapter also takes into consideration the resilient aspects of so-called Third World identities in the process of assimilating a First World culture. There exists a strong will in Oscar to escape from a past he never lived through, but that is very present in Beli's life, in the testimonies of La Inca, the grandmother who informs the readers of her memories, on the streets of Santo Domingo and of Villa Juana, and ultimately, in the voice of Yuniór, the narrator of the story.

In the second section of this chapter, I will deal with some binary relations such as "roots" and "routes" so as to tackle, on the one hand, the issue of identity regeneration along with the need to challenge the monolithic aspects of Dominican identity that are perceived as fixed or unalterable by some of the members of the Dominican community. On the other hand, the binary "insider" and "outsider" illustrates in what ways identity markers determine the border line in between the Dominican nation and the alternative Dominican nation already in the making in the United States.

## Migration and Identity Crisis

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the United States plays a symbolical role. In the story, Beli, the matriarch of the diasporic family, believes she can take refuge in the United States to escape from the clutches of dictatorship and the *fukú* that haunts the de León family. The *fukú* begins when Abelard, a well-established physician who was Beli's stepfather and Oscar's stepgrandfather offended Trujillo. Abelard kept Jacquelyn, his daughter, away from Trujillo's insatiable sexual appetite and, apparently, made some "ill-timed" remarks on the dictatorship. Abelard was a successful doctor in Santo Domingo and his passive resistance to Trujillo made him vulnerable:

At the reception line Trujillo again paused before Abelard. Sniffed the air like a cat. And your wife and daughter?

Abelard trembling but holding it together somehow. Already sensing how everything was going to change. My apologies, Your Excellency. They could not attend.

His porcine eyes narrowed. So I see, he said coldly, and then dismissed Abelard with a flick of his wrist.

Not even Marcus would look at him.

Not four weeks after the party, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral was arrested by the Secret Police. The charge? "Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President. (Díaz 2007: 233)

The *fukú* reaches Beli when Trujillo's daughter finds out that Beli keeps a passionate romance with Dionisio, a gangster who happens to be her fiancé, and that Beli is pregnant, to boot. Trujillo's daughter threatens Beli, but Beli fights back as she is convinced of Dionisio's true love and her courage leads her to being brutally beaten by Trujillo's gangsters and to nearly die. The below passage illustrates that moment:

Soy Trujillo. I'm *also* Dionisio's wife. It has reached my ears that you've been telling people that you're going to marry him and that you're having his child. Well, I'm here to inform you, mi monita, that you will be doing neither. These two very large and capable officers are going to take you to a doctor, and after he's cleaned out that toto podrido of yours there won't be any baby left to talk about. And then it will be in your best interest that I never see your black cara de culo again because I'll feed you to my dogs myself. But enough talk. It's time for your appointment. Say good-bye now, I don't want you to be late.

Beli might have felt as though the crone had thrown boiling oil on her but she still had the ovaries to spit, Cómeme el culo, you ugly disgusting vieja.

(Díaz 2007: 141 italics in the original)

This is the instance that pushes La Inca into asking Beli to leave the Dominican Republic: a female dispute over a man of dubious reputation. As a result of her affair with Dionisio and of the bashing, Beli gets dragged into the dreary politics of the regime in a way that endangers her life very seriously. After some days of hesitation, La Inca, Beli's stepmother, who has some acquaintances in the United States, urges Beli to leave the island despite the fact that "in [La Inca's] mind the US was nothing more and nothing less than a país overrun by gangsters, putas, and no-accounts" (Díaz 2007: 154). La Inca sees no easy solution to the risky situation her stepdaughter is trapped in and, therefore, looks after Beli day and night for the gangsters may still hang around the house and take revenge on Beli. In caring for Beli, La Inca also finds herself in a difficult situation when the Elvises –Trujillo's gangsters– come over their house urging La Inca to deliver her stepdaughter to them. Instead, La Inca confronts the Elvises and ends up intimidating them when she shows up holding a sharp knife. This passage is illustrative as La Inca can only respond by confronting the gangsters with violence. Nobody but her can actually safeguard her stepdaughter. The novel thus highlights what it meant, in Trujillo's state apparatus, for anybody to be placed under close surveillance

in a country where there were no such things as civil rights or state protection when it came to confronting the Trujillo apparatus:

We want to speak to your daughter, Elvis One growled.

Right now, Elvis Two added.

Por supuesto, she said and when she emerged from the house holding a machete the Elvises retreated to their car, laughing.

Elvis One: We'll be back, vieja.

Elvis Two: Believe us. (Díaz 2007: 159)

While this happens, Beli is still extremely vulnerable and dizzy, and recovering from the beating. She can barely stomach the violent episode mainly because she still clings to the fantasy she has nurtured about her future with Dionisio away from the island. Beli aims to escape with Dionisio regardless of the difficulties and dangers implied. This is the way Junot Díaz frames Beli's looming migratory journey to the United States. It is through the representation of state violence and other forms of repression closely related to gender stereotypes such as the imposition of Trujillo's daughter's censorship upon Beli's status as Dionisio's lover that Beli ends up assuming her fate: the diaspora. Given the aforementioned circumstances, Beli's journey to the United States is not voluntary and her final decision is triggered by her survival instinct. She is betrayed by a gangster, whose motivations have to do with the desires of the flesh rather than with setting up a home as is made evident by Dionisio's reaction when he finds out about Beli's pregnancy. Prior to Beli's departure, La Inca, in disarray, and being aware of her imminent loss of Beli, backtracks on the idea of sending her to the United States and gives her the chance to stay home with her: "You don't have to go, La Inca said suddenly, just before the girl stepped into the line. Too late." (Díaz 2007: 163). In the world of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, love implies violence

whether it be physical or emotional, and these violent outbreaks provide sudden turns in the novel and mark its development. Love, on the other hand, also stands for a way out of the context of dictatorship and it is eventually the feeling in which characters seek shelter. Junot Díaz's engagement with love and violence deserves further attention and I will explore the relationship between them in greater detail in chapter four.

If for La Inca the United States embodied all forms of evil, for Beli it will end up representing her host society. Already on the way to the United States, on the airplane, she met her future husband –de León, whom the readers never get to know– and with him she starts a family – Oscar and Lola. Beli cannot remain in a lasting relationship and, eventually, faces motherhood alone –another violent consequence of love. The United States represents democracy and the setting for a fresh start so as to attempt to recover from the conflicts and memories that Trujillo's dictatorship entailed for her. This attempt to recover from her tumultuous past is a challenge for Beli, whose life in the United States can be interpreted as a turning point, which implies the readjustment of the concept of kinfolk. The family belongs now to a culture where racialized migrants are tolerated but neither trusted nor recognized. The novel suggests that for US society immigration implies a growing threat to white supremacy. This explains why in some instances Díaz stretches the narrative device showing that assimilation policies are implemented in an official attempt to homogenize the American experience in the story. As the plot develops, immigration and assimilation policies affect characters in different degrees. The case of Beli is the most problematic because she strives hard to keep her Dominicanness, whereas Oscar and Lola welcome these changes to distinguish themselves from stereotypes, and to quote Homi K. Bhabha's words, “initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration,



and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1994: 1-2), in their case, Dominican society. On the one hand, Oscar and Lola inherit certain Dominican cultural traits and the obsession to comply with them, namely sexual roles and the centrality of sexuality in the conception of the self. On the other hand, Oscar and Lola are detached from the cultural context Beli comes from, and this enables them to construct an alternative Dominicanness, which benefits from an engagement with American society. In line with this, it seems significant to address James Clifford’s question as to “[w]hat experiences [...] they reject, replace or marginalize” (1997: 244). This is so because the literary account of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* puts a particular emphasis on those elements they strive to keep. The novel illustrates the psychological and emotional landscape of the youngest –Oscar and Lola– in their process of accepting their Dominican cultural heritage– specifically those aspects related to sexuality (see chapter four of my Master’s thesis), while, at the same time, adopting some US cultural practices for the sake of “sameness” and inclusiveness.

The notion of inclusiveness is relevant for it is one of the foundational myths of the United States, and the novel tackles this question when it devotes certain passages to the description of Oscar’s and Lola’s college days at Rutgers State University, and the people they come into contact with. The role of education is significant because it is through his attendance to University that Oscar develops his American identity always in combination with his Dominican undertones. Yuniór, one of the multiple narrators in a novel that critic Machado-Sáez denominates as a “polyvocal one” (2011: 523), significantly resorts to intertwining prototypical American genres, such as sci-fi or the heroic world of superheroes, with the unaccountable aspects of the Trujillato in order to narrate Oscar’s reasoning and most impressive inner world. This process reflects in the

construction of Oscar as a writer and in his psychological development as an individual who struggles to define his identity while in the midst of a particularly difficult stage in his life.

In addition to the difficulties met while constructing a home away from home, the de León family faces a profound identity crisis that stems partly from the everlasting shadow of Trujillo –especially in the case of Beli– and partly from the demands of their assimilation into a new culture. The crisis manifests itself first in the relocation of the family in New Jersey as a racialized minority. Junot Díaz, to describe the de León’s newly acquired perception of themselves as members of a minority, resorts to sci-fi and superheroes to establish an analogy with the difficulties that a member of the family, Oscar, has to experience as a first generation Dominican-American living in the midst of a white supremacist society<sup>11</sup>: “[y]ou really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary US ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (Díaz 2007:22). This quote corresponds to a narrative bracketing in which Yunior himself interpellates the readers by sharing his own experience as a child living in the margins of US society and transfers his knowledge to the construction of Oscar as a character, who happens to be in a similar situation. In this intervention, Yunior, the narrator, shows his able relocation of American popular culture in the diasporic imagination of the de León’s, providing an effective example of the not always negative effects of acculturation– despite being apparently more successful than Oscar. In “The Writer as a Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” Anne Garland Mahler points out that “from the perspective of Santo Domingo, the

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar and Lola are the first generation of Dominican-Americans in the novel

United States is imagined as the illusory utopian space of Hollywood movies” (2010: 126). Oscar and Lola cling on to that utopian space of American popular culture precisely because such space empowers them to take on a more active role in the construction of their hyphenated identity. American popular culture offers them a myriad of alternatives that differ significantly from their exposure to the “rigid” Dominicaness Beli epitomizes. This is so especially in the case of Oscar de León, who fosters the hope of becoming a prominent and respectable writer, the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien, whose blend of Africa, Europe and (Latin) America will enable him to appeal to various sensitivities and engage with different cultural discourses. The exploration of Oscar’s desire shapes the inner, already bubbling, transnational and transcultural identity that Díaz’s text endorses.

Before Beli’s arrival in the United States, while daydreaming about a life with Dionisio, she would neglect the Dominican Republic and romanticize the uncertain future in the United States: “[d]ismissing her barrio as an ‘inferno’ and her neighbors as ‘brutos’ and ‘cochinos,’ she bragged about how she would be living in Miami soon, wouldn’t have to put up with this un-country much longer” (Díaz 2007: 128). However, the migratory journey Beli initiates turns out to be harder than she expects and far from idyllic. The host society does not resemble in any way the so-called *‘El Dorado’* some people imagine it to be and she learns very quickly that her new role as a racialized immigrant in the United States entitles her only to a precarious life and to occupations where she cannot aim high nor earn a decent living. Beli’s experience has little to do with the “utopian space” Garland Mahler describes because Beli represents the archetype of a hardened immigrant. Thus, Beli realizes she is merely a drop in the ocean; one more alienated “other” trapped in the jungle of urban modernity, where she

aims to revert a run of bad fortune; she feels aimless, disoriented and insignificant among the crowd while trying to scrape by in the United States. The fact that Beli's husband abandons the family contributes to destabilizing Beli as the household becomes a heavy burden for her. The novel portrays the de León family nearly as a dysfunctional family and, more specifically, depicts Beli, the mother, neglecting and abusing her children, as the agent who enforces on them an education and bringing up which she had naturalized under the Trujillato. She herself is both a victim and an instigator of the fears the dictatorship spread. Beli uses violence to contain Lola's bubbling sexuality, thus reproducing not only the structures of the Trujillato, but also those of La Inca during Beli's youth. Additionally, Beli encourages Oscar to be a "macho" by teaching him that, if necessary, he must use violence to subdue women:

[w]hat's wrong with you? his mother asked. She was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set. When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de León nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.

Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it!

She threw him to the floor. *Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you.* (Díaz 2007: 14 italics added)

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Beli grows up in Trujillo's Santo Domingo. As a consequence, she internalizes and then repeats the strategies of fear and repression she both witnessed and suffered in the past, very especially when she feels that Lola challenges her authority. In the United States, Beli feels isolated because during Oscar's and Lola's upbringing her authority on them wanes. Beli develops a cancer and is often bad-tempered and willing to tell Oscar and Lola off for the slightest trifle. The long shadow of the *fukú* pursues Beli and, in some ways, the fact that the de León are portrayed as a dysfunctional family may also be symptomatic of the fact that

their American experience and their living conditions discomfort them and make them feel both uneasy and displaced despite all the commodities and material progress the United States has to offer. To use Díaz's ironic words: "diaspora was Trujillo's payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú" (Díaz 2007:5). Beli grapples with the modernity and progress that the United States represents, and generally, this reflects in her maladjustment and lack of interest for her son and daughter; and that problematic relationship unleashes yet more violence. The inability to express love is Beli's major weakness and is conducive to creating a stifling atmosphere in the house as the long-running disputes in the household sphere never reach a cathartic climax and, on the contrary, extends themselves in time and become deeper. As a result of this pattern, Lola often longs to escape from the reality of home and of New Jersey and she starts dreaming of the alternatives as early as "when [she] watched *Big Blue Marble* as a kid<sup>12</sup>" (Díaz 2007: 55) in which she discovered the world anew. Again, the use of fantasy and American popular culture in the novel constitutes a space in which characters can resist and subvert their dismal reality. This approach helps Lola hold a power position because her ability to perform –her agency– relies on the external inputs that fantasy and imagination provide for her. This way, her agency gradually moves to center stage and she becomes freer of constraints to the point of daring to confront Beli's grudging attitude.

In the story, migration affects characters in various degrees. Beli is portrayed as a victim of the dictatorship and is trapped in between her memories of the Dominican Republic and her romantic longings for the love stories she never fulfilled. She is writhing in the intense pain caused by loneliness, disaffection and lack of effective

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<sup>12</sup> *Big Blue Marble* was a children's television show in which each episode featured a segment about the real life of a boy and a girl, one American and the other foreign. Source: Wikipedia.

communication in her life to sort out the problems that she faces as an alienated subject, a lack of communication that has caused her grief in the present. The cathartic episode in the hospital sheds light on the emotional world of Beli and the extent to which it affects her subjectivity: “[t]here it was, the Decision That Changed Everything. Or as she broke it down to Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto*, she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America” (Díaz 2007: 113 italics in the original). The emotional barriers she has placed between herself and the world undermine the way she relates to her daughter. Beli is a faultfinding mother, whose ill-mannered attitude towards Lola seems to be jettisoning their relationship precisely because Beli, despite her tortuous past with men, behaves like a female agent of patriarchy by trying to mutilate Lola’s bubbling sexuality. Lola, as a consequence, dreams of a life in which she can develop her interests to their fullest, far from the domestic sphere that constrains her and that crushes flat her chances for success in life. Beli’s model of femininity is exactly the opposite of Lola’s in the sense that Lola is smarter than Beli with men, and that is the core of her problematic relationship with Lola, whereas Oscar’s underdeveloped sexuality does not represent neither a threat nor a source of confrontation, but will become a looming conflict in the years to come. Oscar benefits from a relatively peaceful relationship with Beli and Lola and his role is that of mediator in the long-running disputes between mother and daughter. As a whole, the past of the de León family is a heavy burden that conditions the anxieties they have to deal with as part of the diaspora, as a racialized minority in the United States and as an emerging culture already in the making.

## Diasporic Roots, Transnational Routes and Regeneration

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz initiates a journey towards the transformation of the fictional representation of the Dominican diaspora. The novel constitutes a space for identity negotiation in which Oscar de León faces “a process of mediation [...] to produce a multifaceted and resilient identity that challenges notions of identity in the native culture and the new culture as well” (Bonilla 2004: 204). The journey, as I have already pointed out in previous sections, begins when Beli, the matriarch of the family, escapes the Dominican Republic forced by the persecution of Trujillo’s officers in what might be considered a wise decision and an act of survival. The sociopolitical dimensions of that journey allow Junot Díaz, through the voice of Yunió and other narrators, to navigate Dominican identity understood as a process that encompasses a combination of various forces in dialogue –roots and routes. In the prologue of *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Twentieth Century* anthropologist James Clifford explains the connections between these key terms:

*Routes* begins with the assumption of movement, arguing that travels and contacts are crucial sites for an unfinished modernity. The general topic, if it can be called one, is vast: a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis [...] *travel* emerged as an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture. In these assumptions authentic social existence is, or should be, centered in circumscribed places [...] Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement, roots always precede routes. (1997:2-3)

These forces merge in the experience of the diaspora, which, in itself, leads to a wider understanding of Dominicaness. In his particular way of addressing the diaspora, Junot Díaz strives to provide serious insights into the challenges that Oscar and Lola face both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic.

In “Roots and Routes: Migration, Belonging and Everyday Life” sociologists Christensen and Jensen argue that they find “the concept of roots and routes suitable to develop in-depth understanding of the significance of migration and belonging in people’s everyday lives” (Christensen and Jensen 2011: 147). The transposition of the concept roots and routes into the microcosm of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is of the utmost importance when it comes to analyzing the impact of migration and belonging on the development of emerging identities. In the novel, migration –routes– shapes the construction of Oscar’s growing dual identity. Oscar holds a Dominican identity that revolves around issues of resilience, as critic Bonilla suggests, and transience, thus involving roots and routes in a quasi-regenerative process by which the *fukú* that haunted the de León family in the past no longer determines his ability to perform in the present.

It is therefore pertinent to trace back the reasons for the peak of the Dominican diaspora in the facts that led to the dispersal of Dominicans in large amounts within a relatively short interval of time. According to critic Machado-Sáez, “the formation of the Dominican diaspora was intimately tied to the violence that the Trujillo dictatorship used to forcibly silence opposing voices” (2011: 526). In the novel, the roots of Dominican identity are to be found back in Trujillo’s regime which is the point of departure for the present-day Dominican transnational identity that the novel represents by setting a considerable amount of the plot in the United States. With this strategy, Díaz allows the reader of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to learn that the de León family, despite being relatively away from the island, has managed to integrate the core of Dominican culture in their daily routines. Prominent scholars within the field of Dominican Studies such as Torres-Saillant and Hernández view this transnational



identity as a “cultural state of mind that permits [Dominicans] to remain actively linked to life in the native land” (qtd in Bonilla 2011: 203). The pivotal position that Oscar and Lola occupy in the novel allows them to somehow switch from the position of outsider to that of insider and vice versa, thus highlighting the inherent nuances of belonging. This is also made possible by their ability to navigate the English and Spanish speaking universes. The following passage sheds light on the feeling of awkwardness that Lola experiences at school in the Dominican Republic, while it also illustrates the fluidity associated with the binary outsider/insider:

I have mixed feelings about the school. For one thing, it’s improved my Spanish a lot. The----- Academy is a private school, a Carol Morgan wannabe filled with people my tío Carlos Moya calls los hijos de mami y papi. And then there’s me. If you think it was tough being a goth in Paterson, try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in DR. You will never meet bitchier girls in your whole life. They whisper about me to death. Someone else would have a nervous breakdown, but after Wildwood I’m not so brittle. (Díaz 2007: 71)

The scene at the school provides support to the view that Lola’s identity is fluid and that it shifts depending on her location and the people she interacts with. This assumption proves her polymorphic. In spite of maintaining remarkable ties with the Dominican Republic –the use of Spanish and kinship–, Lola identifies herself more like an outsider than as an insider for she is aware of her distinctive role in the class. Seemingly, she is perceived as inauthentic –almost a fake version of a Dominican girl– in the eyes of upper-class little *dominicanas*, whose disapproval of Lola on the grounds of difference, warns the reader about the existing gap between second-generation Dominican Yorks and Dominicans themselves. This cultural difference also makes the reader aware of how the construction of such an alternative Dominicanness can arouse

feelings of cultural defamiliarization on Dominican peers. The recognition of this difference highlights the uncanny aspects of Lola's identity.<sup>13</sup> Cultural difference gives rise to a transnational consciousness in which Lola's identity representation seeks to accommodate those uncanny aspects that generate gossip in the classroom. Moreover, the quotation above illustrates Lola's "ability to negotiate multiple spaces at once and develop new models of Dominicanness that are more inclusive" (Bonilla 2011: 203), at the expense of deviating from the monolithic representation of Dominicanness that characters such as Beli, La Inca, tía Rubelka or tío Rudolfo endorse as "old" Dominicans.

Oscar's situation, on the contrary, takes a different shape than Lola's. The analysis of Oscar's Dominicanness seems to be reduced to his inability to embody the model of all-powerful and dominant masculinity which is supposedly the trait shared by all Dominican men. This reduction of his identity to a gendered role will be dealt with in Chapter Four of my research. I tend to believe that the way Oscar projects his identity combines diasporic (up)rootedness with the contemporary need of catching up with discourses of belonging in an increasingly global era. Oscar struggles to find himself on a safer ground by becoming a writer after a complex upbringing in a New Jersey ghetto as part of the diaspora. He strives for upward mobility in life<sup>14</sup>, and this is one of the aspects that render him worth studying.

At the outset of the novel, Oscar is reported to be a "normal' Dominican boy raised in a 'typical' Dominican family" (Díaz 2007: 11). However, as the plot develops

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<sup>13</sup> This term is used to express how the familiar becomes strange, and in this context uncanny applies to the hyphenated identity of Lola as a Dominican-American, but still Dominican in spite of the hyphen.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar attends Rutgers University and graduates there to, later on, become a teacher.

he becomes a nerd and an inward-looking boy who finds shelter in books. Oscar aims to detach himself not from his roots, but from the far-reaching consequences of Trujillo's dictatorship that are deeply rooted in the family. His writing is an attempt to make sense of the world that has surrounded him as a child of the diaspora. For instance, one of the aims of Oscar when he writes the manuscript that will eventually go missing is to restore the natural order of things in the present as he strongly believes in the idea that his writing will eventually heal the atrocities of the past –*zafa*.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, there exists a symbiotic process, an ongoing conversation between Oscar's gifted skills as a writer that are nurtured by the fantasy world of American popular culture and his dire need of reconciliation with the history of the family.<sup>16</sup> The migratory journey determines Oscar's literary world, while it influences the psychological development of Oscar and his particular quest for identity.

Thus, the narrative thread of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes a distancing effect from Oscar's and Lola's roots that is, to some degree, embedded in Beli's rigid positioning and in her symbolically standing as the source of Dominican "authenticity" in the United States. For both Oscar and Lola, the renewal of their Dominican identity is intimately related to their strategies of identity deconstruction in that it implies the refusal of Beli's ideology –consider, for instance, her misogynistic attitude towards Lola and how Beli encourages Oscar during his childhood to use

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<sup>15</sup> *Zafa* is the term used in the novel to ward off the curse.

<sup>16</sup> The novel is in-between portraying the history of the country and the story of the family, but is subject to improvisation and inaccuracies as Yunior, the narrative voice, acknowledges in the novel. I found the following passage in which Yunior addresses the readers: "[w]hat's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling silences in here. Trujillo and Company didn't leave a paper trail –they didn't share their German's contemporaries' lust for documentation. And it's not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything" (Díaz 2007:243)

violence against women.<sup>17</sup> Then, by becoming diasporic subjects, they are met with opportunities for political resistance to the past that allow them to construct a more vigorous identity: the hyphenated one as a combination of the values and ideas they want to put into practical use. This distancing effect from Beli operates at the level of rejection, particularly in the case of Lola, who even rebels against the authority imposed by Beli and leaves the household as a sign of autonomy.

The traditional representation of Dominican identity in the text –roots– stems from the Trujillo era in which a model of identity developed which accounts for the lasting effects of dictatorship. However, Oscar’s case casts doubts on the notion of cultural “sameness” because his perception of the Dominican Republic and of the Dominican identity differs from that of Beli, provided that he belongs to the first generation of Dominican-Americans in the family and that he navigates the ins and outs of the binary outsider/insider. His very particular perspective enables Oscar to take some distance from the feeling of alienation and fear that dominate the household. Although he cannot escape from experiencing the dark stories of the family in Santo Domingo, he can barely imagine by then the impact of state violence on the body. As a consequence of the coercive forces verbalized by the testimonies of the past, Oscar has trouble engaging with the society that produced him. Alienation and lack of “sameness” make Oscar pursue his personal agenda by becoming a writer. The reshaping of Dominicanness, in the terms Oscar explores it, implies the transformation as well as the renewal of a whole cultural set of beliefs. In doing so, he incorporates a whole bunch of American undertones, specifically the nerdy nuances –sci-fi, superheroes– he identifies with, and those elements reshape his blurred perception of the world. Moreover, Oscar

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<sup>17</sup> See the quotation in Chapter Four Part II of my Master’s thesis.

can do it from the security that the United States procure to his liberties. The process of reshaping Dominicaness plays a significant role because, through a process of in-depth deconstruction, Oscar deals with the uncanny aspects of Dominican identity that I will explore in chapter four of my Masters thesis. The plot reflects Oscar's anxieties in regard to his inability to fully fit in any of the cultural spheres he grew up in. Due to the dialogue that he establishes between his roots and the route that his life has taken, the novel illustrates the complexities of transient identities. The whole process of incorporating a new cultural source, while he is constructing, at the same time, a new identity out of it, demonstrates why belongingness is key for individuals development. Roots and routes are teeming with the articulation of a multiplicity of identities that lead Oscar to question his Dominicaness in terms of authenticity when he, an adult that has been brought up in a New Jersey ghetto as part of the diaspora, unexpectedly decides to stay on the island. Oscar understands that his chance to come to terms with his Dominicaness depends on his will to truly experience Dominican culture, so the day before his return to the United States he decides to stay longer. Oscar parallels Shabine in Walcott's poem in that Oscar wants to give himself a try by embracing his *patria*. Not surprisingly, he takes the decision while contemplating the ocean.<sup>18</sup> This is actually a parallelism that links both Walcott's and Díaz's texts:

Not to go home with Lola. It was a decision that came to him one night on the Malecón, while staring out over the ocean. What do I have waiting for me in Paterson? he wanted to know. He wasn't teaching that summer and he had all his notebooks with him. Sounds like a good idea to me, his sister said. You need some time in the patria. Maybe you'll even find yourself a nice campesina. It felt like the right thing to do. Help clear his head and his heart of the gloom that had

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<sup>18</sup> The lines from Walcott's poem are as follows: "I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road/ I know these islands from Monos to Nassau/ a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes/ that they nickname Shabine, the patois for/ any red-nigger, and I, Shabine, saw/ when these slums of empire was paradise." (qtd in Díaz 2007:n/a)

filled them these months. His mother was less hot on the idea but La Inca waved her into silence. *Hijo, you can stay here all your life.* (Díaz 2007: 278-9 italics added)

This passage depicts Oscar's commitment to exploring the intrinsic aspects of Dominican culture in order to find out more about himself in the process of constructing his *à-la-carte* Dominican-American identity, thus reinforcing the identity markers of his own choice. He needs to reinvent himself after experiencing disaffection and the failures of love in his American life, which is devoid of the passion he needs to nurture his almost starving soul: "I don't know what's wrong with me, he said to his sister over the phone. I think the word is *crisis* but every time I open my eyes all I see is *meltdown*" (Díaz 2007:268 italics in the original). For migrants and descendants of migrants their roots operate not only as identity markers, but also as the starting point of an ongoing process of renewal that is determined by the influence of the host society. In the novel, roots are in motion and undergoing a process of reinvention; hence, their relation to the migratory flow in the reshaping of identity. Oscar is constantly struggling with his cultural roots in order to find a more challenging route in his American life. Anthropologist James Clifford developed the relationship between the terms "roots" and "routes", and observes: "[d]iaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct [...] alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (1997: 251, italics in the original). Oscar explores the interplay between the forms of community consciousness that Clifford mentions with a particular emphasis on his wish to perceive the Dominican nation as an outsider; hence, Oscar's strong desire to penetrate into the day-to-day routines of the island, which is symptomatic of the cultural hybridity that is inherent in him. The fact that he belongs to

the diaspora along with his desire to become the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien underline the importance of the English literary tradition in the text. This trend speaks significantly of the cultural diversity he navigates. The combination of various cultural sources is what actually gives a meaningful existence to Oscar's life, which is, in itself, a trait that he shares with Derek Walcott in the section of the poem discussed earlier. In line with this view, critic Machado-Sáez argues: "diaspora is consequently defined as inevitably associated with diversity" (2011: 525). This diversity and hybridity are celebrated within the frame of a novel that places them against the pernicious effect of the concept of national purity defended by Trujillo and which leads to the massacre of Haitians as "necessary" to keep the Dominican nation "pure". The novel also comments on the diversity of love within diasporic communities in opposition to the problematic relationship between love and violence during the dictatorship that I will analyze in the section to come.

## **Chapter Four: Dominican Sexualities and Gender Representations in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.**

My main purpose in this final chapter is to discuss the role of sexuality by analyzing the portrayal of gender stereotypes in the novel, and the cultural reversals in regard to the representation of sexuality endorsed by the text. I will focus primarily on the literary strategies deployed by the novel in order to illustrate the ties between love and violence. These thematic elements are embedded in the mercurial mood of Dominicans and the internal connections between both of them affect the course of interpersonal relations. Even though love and violence may be, if in outlook at least, mutually exclusive, the novel proves that just the opposite is true in its treatment of the borders between the expressions of love and violence. The immateriality of said border is revealed by characters constantly trespassing it. The connections between love and violence provide insightful views into the psychology of characters, thus stressing the emotional instability that dominates the narration of their lives. Moreover, the exploration of the existing boundaries between these two emotions make characters confront their fears and the harsh reality resulting from a tumultuous socio-political life. In the novel, love tends to be associated with both escapism and characters' will to promote changes in their lives. Whilst violence operates as a working force which seeks to contain characters' inherent ability to promote the changes they long for. Therefore, love and violence grapple with each other and the outcome of this confrontation equates the struggle between alternative modes of (identity) representation and the unchanging nature enforced by the elites. The section "Love and Violence" will deal with these aspects and will also lead the discussion towards the different approaches to masculinity and femininity that are represented in the text.



Secondly, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the main male protagonist – Oscar de León– is described as being very much concerned with fulfilling Dominican male sexual standards. More specifically, he aims to become a representative of the unquestioned heteronormativity at the heart of Dominican culture and society. That is precisely one of the central themes the novel intends to explore while challenging the model of masculinity said heteronormativity imposes. As the plot develops, Oscar problematizes his failed attempts to become a womanizer, an object of female desire and the faithful representation of a well-rounded Dominican macho; that is to say, a domineering, ladykiller, a hypersexualized and scrounger. All these attributes are essentially drawn together in the construction of characters such as Dionisio or Yuniór. Much to Oscar’s chagrin, he embodies none of the former, but his character lays a siege to the traditional construction of masculinity within the frame of an especially androcentric Dominican culture. In this sense, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* provides an arena for the discussion and the establishment of an emerging masculinity that differs from the Dominican stereotype. Oscar de León can barely embrace those traditional attitudes and, as the plot unfolds and he grows into adulthood, he gradually feels deprived of his masculinity in a social milieu mostly dominated by Beli or La Inca. Instead, he develops an apathetic, infirm, quasi-lethargic diasporic masculinity that deserves special attention because male feebleness makes the standards of Dominican masculinity tremble. Another question I want to address in the section is whether the diasporic cultural experience contributes to promoting a different version of masculinity.

This “new” account of masculinity develops in contrast to –as well as in opposition to– the traditional macho. It is, indeed, an analysis of and reaction to the

gender performance constraints that emerge in the microcosm of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* resulting from the long shadow of the Trujillato. Consequently, the construction of Oscar de León seeks to fill-in the gap between the demands of his family, following the sexual cultural practices of Dominican culture, and his own perception of masculinity, which undeniably enables the rise of an alternative male model. However, due to the pressure exerted by traditional agents of masculinity, Oscar's anxiety deepens and his insistence on becoming a Dominican macho puts an end to his wondrous life. It is, however, worth noting that the novel boasts an overly emotional masculinity that is ill-regarded by the society of the novel, but enforced by Díaz through the voice of Yunior.

The final section of this chapter aims to explore the representation of femininity through the analysis of Lola's character. In the novel, there exists a simmering subversive representation of masculinity. However, in what ways does Junot Díaz approach femininity? Is Díaz promoting alternative representations of femininity? Does the diaspora lay groundwork for alternative expressions of Dominican femininity? To a certain extent, I would say it does, since Junot Díaz portrays a battle-hardened, courageous and contentious Lola whose exploration and awareness of sensuality seems to empower her, although the reality is that despite the promising point of departure in Lola's representation, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shows that no matter any kind of resistance or subversiveness to patriarchy because, in the microcosm of the novel, the function of femininity is to serve patriarchy.

## Love, Violence and Gender

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz constructs a set of characters that are portrayed as extremely passionate about love. In so doing, the novel explores the intrinsic aspects of Caribbean sexualities, and more specifically, the *mise-en-scene* of masculinity as well as the promotion of an alternative masculinity that is at odds with the traditional phallogentric Dominican culture that the text illustrates.<sup>19</sup> Initial resistance to traditional representations of love and gender roles is replaced by each and every character trying to accommodate stereotyped roles of masculinity and femininity. This change, I believe, seems to respond to their wanting to establish a notion of sameness and of cultural identification. Every scene is rich in the implication of the desire for love, but it also presents the violent consequences of love in those characters affected by the failures of the political and social systems around them. Junot Díaz speaks of love at great length by setting into motion different, but equally engrossing, ill-fated relationships that show how the mechanics of love work in the microcosm of the novel. The reader thus plunges into a story in which the centrality of love heightens one of the most distinctive features of Dominican identity, perhaps even the core of Dominican culture itself; love is pursued even at the cost of losing one's life. So much so that Yunion observes: "[e]very Dominican family has stories about crazy loves, about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar's family was no different" (Díaz 2007:45).

In our analysis of the complexities that love entails it is important to consider that in such a traditional society as the Dominican love stands for male weakness

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<sup>19</sup> I will deal with the representation of masculinity in greater detail in the next section.

because women's access to power is predicated upon love; hence, the resistance of male characters, except for Oscar, to commit themselves to female desires. In connection with this view, Victor Seidler argues:

[o]ur freedom comes from the use of our rational faculties. This also defines our liberal moralism and is the core of our humanity. It also becomes the basis of our experience of masculine superiority over women who are identified with emotions, feelings and desires. Within this framework, falling in love is a sign of our lack of freedom. It reflects an understandable weakness. (1989:24)

Commitment to love is a risky enterprise for male identities and the brutality of violence cuts off female desires to gain ground in men's lives. The novel is teeming with examples in which the dynamics of violence plays a significant role in the lives of Beli, Lola and Oscar. More specifically, the use of violence in the novel helps to illustrate the mechanics of power relations between male and female characters. The plot thus portrays primarily a society in which women are dependent on men's ability to generate wellbeing, but, ultimately, it is punishment and physical violence all they get in return. Beli and her relationship with Dionisio, the gangster, exemplify the most obvious example of the latter when she trusts a series of promises that are never fulfilled by him. Despite Beli's aspirations to make some progress in life –she longs for a materially comfortable life–, she ends up trapped in the spaces that masculinity neatly creates to subdue women. Dionisio pays lip service to Beli's demands and takes advantage of her desire to escape from the island. Moreover, he accelerates Beli's fall from grace when Trujillo's officers beat her almost to death. This is one example in the novel in which violence undeniably shows a trait of masculinity, abuse of power, that seeks to dictate the terms and spaces in which femininity operates. Thus, Beli is pushed into assimilating the pre-established roles for women within Dominican patriarchy. The possibility for resistance in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is just an illusion

because the most fundamental –and essential– aspects of masculinity, in the novel, revolve both around violence and the over empowerment of the patriarchal structures that have since long oppressed the female body.

Therefore, neither the effective deconstruction of masculinity –through the negotiation of Oscar’s masculine identity– nor its reconstruction can be considered a feasible accomplishment because, in the end, Oscar dies and no visible achievement makes him a respectable male figure, not to mention the empowerment of female characters as a social agent to promote changes on a large scale. In the novel, violence functions as an act of containment through which male characters perpetuate their status-quo in the world of the novel.

The role assigned to women in Díaz’s text enables them to experience limited power. When that happens, it is mainly to satisfy male sexual desire, as we will see more clearly in the cases of Ybón and Lola. Additionally, in the microcosm of the novel, Beli’s role as a female agent of patriarchy responds to a mere act of survival given the nonexistent possibilities to counteract the effects of it on her. This is by no means incidental as one of the purposes of Junot Díaz as a writer, as he acknowledges in an interview with Diógenes Cespedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, is to trigger debate on the political and cultural representation of the Dominican sphere among his readers.<sup>20</sup>

There is no doubt about the centrality of violence in the Trujillo’s political regime and this view is transferred into the literary agenda of Junot Díaz in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The politics of fear both threat and affect very especially the position of women in Dominican society and culture as the novel attests. Beli’s

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<sup>20</sup> See quotation on page 33 of my Master’s thesis.

hard-earned knowledge of the hierarchical gender relations never transforms her frustrations as a woman mistreated by the political apparatus of the Dominican Republic into an active agent of feminism. Far from questioning those brutal actions, Beli naturalizes violence against women and internalizes the terms established by the patriarchy.<sup>21</sup> Even though, at first, there is initial resistance on the part of the female characters to comply with the characteristics associated with Dominican women in the mindset of Dominican men, the use of violence eradicates any attempt at promoting neither a feminist nor a liberating discourse. The fact that Oscar refuses to assume that violent and dominant role makes him vulnerable in the eyes of Dominican machos, but, paradoxically, Oscar also constitutes a threat for the continuation of a male dominant structure because he cuts it off. Oscar has indeed a blurred image of what a Dominican macho should be, and his loneliness reflects the narrow-minded emotional education of his Dominican male peers with whom he cannot develop his masculine identity to its fullest without being ridiculized. So the constraints cast by the hypermasculine nature of men's identities undermine both his interaction with men and with women. This failure is symptomatic of the narrow definition of masculinity that circulates widely among Dominicans, while it also highlights the patriarchal order of things that predominate in the literary world of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

If we compare how the mechanics of love work in Oscar and Yuniór, we can arrive at the conclusion that Yuniór is the antithesis of Oscar. Whereas Oscar assumes the belief that love is a duty to be performed with honor, Yuniór treats women as objects, even Lola, the only woman he truly loves. Their on and off relationship brings to the light another type of violence. Although Yuniór shows remorse, his skills as a

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<sup>21</sup> See quotation on page 70.

womanizer have caused emotional pain in Lola: “[a]ll you need to know is that if we talked once a week we were lucky, even though we were nominally boyfriend and girlfriend. All my fault, of course. Couldn’t keep my rabo in my pants” (Díaz 2007:311). Yuniór’s shallow understanding of love and faithfulness is the prevailing attitude among most of the male characters in the novel, thus demonstrating that true love is a complex emotion to cope with in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Interestingly, this conception of love is equally shared by both the Dominicans in the island and the diasporic, and the expression of their sexualities supports a monolithic, quasi demoralizing, view of love with plenty of *machista* undertones. This view clashes with Oscar’s understanding of love since he longs for unattainable romanticism in his life. Oscar worships love above all and recognizes its futility at the same time. The following quotation from McCullers’ novella (*The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 1951) undergirds this notion, shared by Oscar, that love is the most important yet inaccessible human emotion. I believe this conception of love is echoed in the character of Oscar due to his tendency to isolate himself from the society that surrounds him. As a desperate lover he seems to be dependent on loneliness to further nurture his world of fantasy. McCullers notes:

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons –but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which had lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world –a world intense and strange, complete in himself. (Carson McCullers, 1951)

I believe that McCullers' insightful quotation is significant to understand Oscar's sensitivity and approach to love. McCullers comes to suggest that loneliness, the state in which Oscar is precisely trapped, is, in fact, a condition that is inherent in human beings. Throughout the story, Oscar daydreams about what he considers to be the perfect lover. His loneliness, besides illustrating his clumsiness at seducing women, also mirrors his neoromantic attitude towards love in the era of fast love. In relation to loneliness, critic Monica Hannah establishes an analogy between Junot Díaz's and the deceased García Márquez's treatment of solitude. She argues that in Díaz's novel "[e]ach new generation seems inevitably to suffer from the "solitude" that García Márquez explores, sharing the same pessimistic and perhaps even fatalistic perspective" (Hannah 2010:500). For instance, Beli never remains in a relationship, Yunior is alone by the end of the novel, Lola follows social dictates and marries a man without being in love with him, and Oscar dies in the canefields as a victim of a tainted affair. These examples, I believe, reinforce the connections with McCullers text because, in the end, love's reward never comes true; hence, the intertextual connection that Monica Hannah establishes.

As a result of his loneliness, Oscar faces a profound personal crisis before he runs forth and back the Dominican Republic when he meets Ybón, a semi-retired prostitute. After one of Oscar's cousins many attempts to drag him into a whorehouse he gets to know Ybón and his perception of life changes completely. Oscar's life in the United States is in dire need of emotions, and his affair with Ybón represents a turning point in his life: "Oscar consider[s] her the start of his *real* life" (Díaz 2007:279 italics in the original). In the Dominican Republic, Oscar faces the internal debate that he has postponed so often in the United States. A summer in Santo Domingo makes everything



fall into place because his concerns about his own sexual identity seem to make an astonishing progress once he begins to experience his own masculinity. Much to Oscar's overoptimism, he is about to face the beginning of the end of his life, despite of the fact that he believes that Ybón was "the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (Díaz 2007:283). Even though Oscar's belief tests his masculinity, he is actually in the ditch since Ybón has a boyfriend, perhaps a pimp. Oscar clings to the illusion that his relationship with Ybón can develop his masculinity in the terms established by Dominican culture. He thus ignores La Inca's advices –as Beli did in the past– about Ybón's suitability:

His mother and his abuela met him at the door; excuse the stereotype, but both had their hair in rolos and couldn't believe his sinvergüencería. Do you know that woman's a PUTA? Do you know she bought that house CULEANDO?

For a moment he was overwhelmed by their rage, and then he found his footing and shot back, Do you know her aunt was a JUDGE? Do you know her father worked for the PHONE COMPANY?

You want a woman, I'll get you a good woman, his mother said, peering angrily out the window. But that puta's only going to take your money.

I don't need your help. And she ain't a puta. (Díaz 2007: 282-3)

Despite La Inca's and Beli's vociferous advice, Oscar is determined, for better or worse, to date Ybón regularly. In fact, the affair with someone like Ybón is what he had always daydreamt about and, somehow, now that his dreams come true, he needs to show off about it. Oscar has been the laughing stock of those around him and even his family have criticized his lack of skills to become a Dominican womanizer. From that moment onward, Oscar's character experiences a sudden turn, and he momentarily abandons his responsibilities as a dutiful teacher and as a writer to embrace the joys of courtship.

Ybón stands for the opportunity to recover from his particular curse on women since that instance in his early childhood when he fell in love with Maritza Chacón. In many ways, Oscar's story parallels Beli's, and this is indicative of how Beli's curse goes down into the next generations. The constant gossip, as happened back in the day to Beli when she had an affair with Dionisio and Trujillo's daughter threatened her, jeopardizes Oscar's chance to love a woman. Ybón's boyfriend learns about the affair between them and the brutal reaction comes quickly. The *capitán*, the title with which the narrator introduces Ybón's official lover, like Beli's Dionisio, bears an intimate relation with the state—he is an officer. Once again the power of the state comes to the foreground of the novel to wipe out another member of the de León family. The novel describes the *capitán* as a “[m]otherfucker [who] even had First World teeth” (Díaz 2007:295). Thus, he is described as combining the brutality of the Third-World with the materialistic advantages of the “developed world”.

Similarly, Oscar underscores the clash between these two worlds for he himself is a product of the US modernity and progress, but also of the poverty and underdevelopment of the Dominican Republic. The following scene depicts Oscar's in vain struggle for Ybón. Possession gives visibility to their dispute and is, therefore, a central theme since both Oscar and the *capitán* fight over who keeps Ybón. This struggle over Ybón foregrounds the patriarchal perspective that is equally shared by the two men:

Breath knocked out of him so bad he honestly thought he was going to die of asphyxiation. The captain's face appeared over his: If you ever touch my mujer again I'm going to kill you, parigüayo, and Oscar managed to whisper, You're the ex, before Messrs. Grundy and Grod picked him up (with some difficulty), squeezed him back into their Camry, and drove off. Oscar's last sigh of Ybón? The capitán dragging her out of the Pathfinder cabin by her hair.

He tried to jump out of the car but Gorilla Grod elbowed him so hard that all the fight jumped clean out of him.

Night time in Santo Domingo. A blackout, of course. Even the Lighthouse out for the night.

Where did they take him? Where else. *The canefields*.

How's that for eternal return? Oscar so bewildered and frightened he pissed himself. (Díaz 2007: 296 italics added)

The cane fields play a symbolic role in the novel because they reinforce the connections between state power and the economic source and sustenance of the state in the shape of the Dominican Republic's main export produce. This productive model, as I mentioned earlier, develops during the Trujillato and also hints at the co-responsibility of the United States in the consolidation of the violent structures that still persist after the Trujillato. Every time a violent action that involves the state occurs, it takes place in the cane fields. This pattern in the narration highlights the connections among the use of violence of the state agents, state secrecy, and the privacy that the canefields grant potential killers, thus perpetuating the *modus operandi* of Trujillo even after his passing. Oscar does not want to give up on Ybón for he feels she is the last chance he has to grasp his dream: the accomplishment of a Dominican male status-quo. After the violent episode in the canefields, Oscar flies back to the United States with the idea of returning to Santo Domingo because "he realized, rather unhelpfully, that had he and Ybón not been serious the capitán would probably never have fucked with him. Proof positive that he and Ybón had a relationship" (Díaz 2007: 303). For the first time in his life Oscar fights over a woman and his flat personality throughout the novel mutates and evolves because his confidence grows stronger once he realizes that his dream is feasible. It is precisely because Oscar is a dreamer that death has no transcendental meaning to him. Oscar has indeed pictured himself as a romantic hero. Therefore, to die

young and for love is the sweetest option precisely because of his romantic nature. At the outset of the novel, Díaz introduces a citation from the *Fantastic Four* to illustrate the (un)importance of citizens in Trujillo's regime. Oscar does not escape from that category as regards the title of the novel because his is a brief, but wondrous life. The title of the novel plays with the citation and Díaz, I believe, uses it to counteract Trujillo's influence on their lives. The citation reads: "[o]f what import are brief, nameless lives...to Galactus??" (Díaz 2007: n/a)

Without a shadow of a doubt, in the fictional world of Junot Díaz's novel, love is a driving force. Yuniór, the narrator, spares no detail in the description of the ins and outs of the intense emotional worlds included in the text. Moreover, Yuniór is never afraid to make clear the desires of the flesh that abound in the mindset of a cast of characters for whom love is supposedly the way out from the mental collapse that they have to navigate very often. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* intertwines the multifaceted natures of love and violence that out of balance passion unleashes in a country of huge contrasts, like the Dominican Republic, devastated by dictatorship and with a problematic colonial history. Violence operates as a repressive force in the narrative structure of the novel in order to highlight the way the dictatorship of the Dominican Republic silences any dissent movement or attempt to alter "the natural order of things" imposed by the regime. The novel also explores other accounts of love and violence through the character of Beli and Oscar. The case of Beli sets into motion the politics of migratory identities that the text largely promotes and that I have developed in a previous section, whereas Oscar's mission in the text seems to be to embrace the politics of transnationalism in that his passion for his roots enables him to build bridges between two disparate cultures. The formation of a world that runs

parallel to the many misfortunes in their lives is what pushes the cast of characters into taking shelter in love. Oscar's death symbolizes the triumph of violence over his will to love, but it suggests, at the same time, that determination is the key for personal fulfillment. The scene in the canefields describes his acceptance of death because having loved someone implies the accomplishment of his major driving force in life.

### **Interrogating Manhood**

One of the major themes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the exploration, construction and, ultimately, the representation of (diasporic) masculinity, particularly through the lens of Yuniór and the story of Oscar. Broadly speaking, gender difference determines the fate of the cast of characters. Whereas most of the characters supposedly comply with the requirements of their internalized gender roles, Oscar's masculinity maps out an alternative route. The latter develops in opposition to the monolithic, quasi-unalterable notion of masculinity that the novel somehow challenges in order to display a more inclusive stance of it. In this way, the novel incorporates stories like that of Oscar, whose perception clashes with the already constructed view of masculinity and also constitutes a counterexample of it. This model enhances the yet insufficiently explored aspects of the emotional, inner world of the masculine. This is worth-mentioning in a text-world like that of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in which Trujillo's acts of villainy, Yuniór's infidelities and other male characters' brutal actions towards women define the masculine as mean, daring and aggressive.

It is important to note that in Oscar's representation of masculinity, violence is relegated to the outer sphere of his emotional world in that he, in contrast to other males in the novel, never makes use of violence to subdue any of the female characters with which he comes into contact. Instead, he is the object of male violence and within the story he is feminized rather than hypermasculinized. At the very beginning of the novel, Oscar's natural inability to dominate women exasperates Beli, who encourages the use of violence for the sake of imposing respectability and authority upon women: "[d]ale un galletazo [...] then see if the little puta respects you" (Díaz 2007:14). Immediately thereafter, Yuniór interprets Oscar's mild-mannered nature as only partly the result of the absence of a male figure during his upbringing: "[i]t wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" (Díaz 2007:15). Nonetheless, the absence of this masculine role model in Oscar's life, as Yuniór suggests, may not necessarily be the reason that explains Oscar's symbolic emasculation. In "Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities", E. Antonio de Moya analyzes power and totalitarianism in Dominican masculinities. He concludes:

From ancient times in the Dominican Republic, women have been seen as playing a pivotal role in the cultural transmission of gender anxiety and homophobia to younger generations. Parents strongly fear that their children could eventually "become" homosexual and, because of this, the mother tends to behave as the guardian of child sexuality probably in order to avoid aspersions on the father's masculinity. (2004:72)

Despite the fact that Oscar lacks a masculine role model, Beli tries her best to educate Oscar in accordance with the socially constructed view on gender and sexuality in the Dominican Republic. According to the narration, Oscar's masculinity dwindles and his possibilities to hold a power position within the androcentric Dominican culture seem to

be threatened by his symbolic emasculation. The development of the plot confirms Oscar's pattern when he attends Rutgers University and shows his inability to seduce and/or hook up with anyone, thus highlighting his potential emasculation until Ybón moves to center stage.

Junot Díaz constructs the character of Oscar de León to problematize the representation of masculinity in the microcosm of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The narration informs the readers of Oscar's emotional involvement with Maritza Chacón and Olga by the age of seven. At that precise moment, the narrator describes Oscar as "something of a Casanova" (Díaz 2007:11) and his engagement with girls sounds promising within the parameters of Dominican culture: "[I]ook at that little macho. His mother's friend said. Que hombre"(Díaz 2007:14). Once again, the narrator describes Oscar in flattering terms, but this time his words anticipate Oscar's fall from grace: "[i]t truly was a *Golden Age* for Oscar, one that reached its *apothecosis* in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only *ménage à trois*" (Díaz 2007:13 italics added). However, from that moment onwards, Oscar is in torment and trapped in his particular *fukú* because his emotional landscape becomes bleak. As a proof of this, Yuniór abandons his cool tone in the narration of Oscar's life to move onto one of despair. The reason for this change rests on the fact that Oscar is no longer the desirable bona fide Dominican macho that Yuniór will epitomize. This sudden turn in Oscar's life causes a state of desperation in Lola to the point that she voices her inner concern that he will "die a virgin unless [he] starts *changing*" (Díaz 2007:25 italics in the original). Considering Lola's remark, the development of sexuality occupies a central position in the mindset of Dominicans at a premature stage in their lives. The changes Lola promotes in Oscar's attitude seek to

replace his kind-hearted, genuine nature by a more appealing and (hyper) masculine one in the eyes of *dominicanas*. This is precisely because the good virtues that Oscar possesses are regarded as his major weaknesses rather than the source of an overly tolerant view on the distorted notion of Dominican masculinity. The lack of a dominant, all-encompassing hypermasculine and hypersexual behavior relegates Oscar to the margins of Dominican manhood. This is so to the point that it will lead the boys –Al and Miggs, Oscar’s childhood friends– to stop hanging out with Oscar when their sexual consciousness blossoms.

Within the frame of the traditional representation of masculinity in the Dominican Republic, the novel shows either no tolerance of or no space for male feebleness. Such an attitude may well be ill-regarded and may be read as indicative that something is wrong not only with the male that shows feeble attitudes, but also with the established gender categories and roles in the Dominican sexual imaginary that have not managed to bring said individual into their fold. The absence of a clearly predominant hypermasculine behavior in Oscar lays siege upon his Dominican identity as a whole, contributing to his difficulties identifying with both the diaspora and the Dominican Republic itself. Despite being apparently heterosexual, Oscar represents a challenge for normative sexualities in that the narrator and other characters constantly use Oscar’s scarce success with women, one of the uncanny aspects of his Dominican identity, to pinpoint the cracks on the smooth surface of Dominican male identity:

You ever eat toto? Melvin would ask, and Oscar would shake his head, answer decently, no matter how many times Mel asked. Probably the only thing you ain’t eaten, right? Harold would say, Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, *I am Dominican, I am*. It didn’t matter what he said. (Díaz 2007: 180 italics added)



The above citation foregrounds Oscar's struggle to convince his peers that no matter his failure as a womanizer as he will be a Dominican man for the rest of his life. Oscar feels overwhelmed by his friends' bullying pressure. Researchers Connell and Messerschmidt argue that: "the concept of masculinity is said to rest logically on a dichotomization of sex (biological) versus gender (cultural) and thus marginalizes or naturalizes the body" (2005:836). Oscar de León deviates from the stereotypical Dominican macho; that is to say, from the cultural version of masculinity promoted by the specific cultural milieu of the Dominican Republic the aforesaid critics refer to. Therefore, besides belonging to the margins of society in the United States –he grew up in a ghetto– Oscar also belongs to the margins both of the Dominican diasporic masculinity in the United States and of the Dominican Republic. His passiveness, mellowness and marginality seem to epitomize the antithesis of masculinity. Within the androcentric Dominican culture depicted in the novel, I believe that Oscar stands for an apocalyptic threat of the masculine trope because, somehow, his endorsement of a mellow masculinity, respectful of women, shows that the perdurability of the patterns circulated by Trujillo are deceptive. Oscar's masculinity develops in huge contrast to that of the hypermasculine narrator, who actually underscores Oscar's clumsiness at seducing women to secure his status-quo as a Dominican man: "dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)" (Díaz 2007:11 italics in the original). The power position Yuniór holds becomes conspicuous by the fact that he is the one in charge of narrating Oscar's misfortunes, and Yuniór does so in a particularly hyperbolic style.

Although Oscar fulfills the racial, ethnic and linguistic features of the community he belongs to, thus sharing a recognizable common ground, he lacks the

sexual identification with his male peers. In the eyes of his Dominican peers, he still needs to further improve his poor skills as a potential womanizer to gain respectability and comradeship among those who look down on him. Interestingly, and in line with these remarks, critic Elena Machado Saéz argues that Oscar is “a subject that the Dominican nation cannot assimilate” (2011:523). Why is this so? During Trujillo’s regime, the dictator imposed a rigid hetero-normative state, in which masculinity adopted a single stance of it, thus shutting the door for a multiplicity of gender expressions. The character of Oscar de León seems to be defying the social structures of the profoundly androcentric culture inherited from the Trujillato. Therefore, Oscar is greeted with scorn by men and women alike because he is in fact, a destabilizing agent whose masculinity breaks the conventions attached to the hypermasculine performativity of gender roles in the Dominican Republic.

Whereas the other men reject femininity as a way to reinforce their masculinity, Oscar becomes the scapegoat, the failure among Dominican *machos*. If we analyze the other profiles we will see that Yunior –the narrator– is portrayed as a man who is unable to remain in a relationship with Lola precisely because of his insatiable sexual desire, as I have illustrated in the previous section. He thus fits into the category of a womanizer who does not show remorse for his infidelities and the pain they cause Lola. This profile is socially accepted in the Dominican Republic, signifying virility, power and the masculine. As for Abelard, “[u]n hombre muy serio, muy educado y muy bien plantado” (Díaz 2007:211), despite being a dutiful and loving husband, also keeps an extra marital relationship with the housemaid whom he truly loves since his youth, but did not marry because she did not belong to his class. Additionally, other relevant male characters that are represented in the novel –Trujillo and Dionisio– also cheat on the

women around them to signify their masculinity. All things considered, it seems like their existence as men is fundamentally based on their ability to seduce and possess women in large numbers. The novel provides various male roles in which the centrality of hypermasculinity stands out notably. Likewise, these male roles are indicative of the risks entailed in being a woman in a culture in which female desire or personal fulfillment seems to be satisfied only via hypersexualized masculinity. In other words, to subdue women is tantamount to empowering masculinity. This pattern is conducive to considering women as objects in the clutches of Dominican patriarchal ideology as portrayed by the novel.

My analysis of the representation of masculinity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* benefits from the the portrayal of three generations of males, whose intergenerational connections walk the reader through androcentrism. Within the established male-centered national view in which masculinity predominates, there exist some agents whose presence challenges the concept of masculinity, namely homosexuals and non-normative masculinities like that of Oscar. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a diasporic text provides an entry point to those non-normative sexualities so as to include them in the national and diasporic imaginary of the Dominican Republic, thus articulating an all inclusive approach that, I believe, may mirror the foundational myth of the United States. This view is perhaps one of the bridging elements between the Dominican diaspora in the novel and the host society. Part of the novel is set in the United States, and its cultural influence on the diasporic members of the family –especially Oscar– results in the articulation of other expressions that differ from the normative. In this case, the United States operates as the guarantor of civil rights and liberties. In “Negotiating Gender: Across the Disjunctures of the

Caribbean Diaspora” critic Timothy Chin comments on the role of the diaspora both in the development of liberties and in the discussion of taboos. He argues:

breaking the silence that surrounds issues of sexuality in Caribbean discourse necessitates a simultaneous interrogation of prevailing constructs of nation and national identity. In this regard, the usefulness of a diasporic perspective [...] might be especially salient for the articulation of gay, lesbian, and other non-normative sexualities. (2007:533)

(Dominican) masculinity is above all constructed against homosexuality, and in opposition to the world of intense emotions that Oscar represents. In line with this view, Trujillo seems to fear a Dominican nation where homosexuality comes out of the closet, and the novel illustrates the consequences of Trujillo’s desire to impose heteronormativity. For instance, consider the following passage when Oscar moves to college and tío Rudolfo offers him a gift: “[i]n September he headed to Rutgers New Brunswick, his mother gave him a hundred dollars and his first kiss in five years, his tío a box of condoms: Use them all, he said, and then added: *On girls*” (Díaz 2007:49 italics added). Interestingly, in “Passing and the State in Junot Díaz’s *Drown*” Dorothy Stringer criticizes the fact that Junot Díaz’s works, including the novel worked upon in this research, do not portray openly a same sex relationship, despite some hints that are conducive to thinking of that possibility. Stringer argues that:

[w]e do not see a man love another man, despite the fact that love happens every day, in every kind of place, including deindustrialized mid-New Jersey immigrant neighborhoods. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, with its titular reference to the Oscar Wilde case, similarly prefers ideal to real queers. (2013:121)

I agree with Stringer that in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* there would seem to be a possibility for the very same Oscar to come out of the closet. The novel

also validates the idea that Trujillo fears a wide range of sexual sensitivities when Trujillo comes up with a false rumour and accuses Abelard of being homosexual to discredit him in the eyes of Dominican elites. Consider the following passage in which Trujillo's harassment jeopardizes Abelard's respectability:

I have seen you here often, Doctor, but lately without your wife. Have you divorced her?

I am still married, Your Enormity. To Socorro Hernández Batista.

That is good to hear, El Jefe said, I was afraid that you might have turned into *un maricón*. Then he turned to the lambesacos and laughed. Oh, Jefe, they screamed, you are *too much*. (Díaz 2007: 222 italics in the original)

From the above quotation one can arrive at the conclusion that, in Trujillo's regime, the respectability of men hinges on heterosexuality as well as on their ability to brag about it publicly and in opposition to non-normative sexualities. Interestingly, the "too much" the *lambesacos* utters –significantly, "scream"– reflects a stereotypical clichéd effeminate behavior and does not satisfy Trujillo. When it comes to expressing desire and sexuality, the narration of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes explicit the profound rejection of homosexuality in Trujillo's era, and, to some extent, in the Dominican imaginary once the narration shifts towards the life of the characters in the United States and in the post-Trujillo era. Masculinity is constructed by trampling on the rights of women and homosexuals. Trujillo was very effective at bragging publicly about women because "[d]ude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass" (Díaz 2007:217). Oscar, on the contrary, remains virgin until almost the end of the novel, but the most interesting part of the novel, at least in terms of the exploration of his masculinity, certainly has to do with a quintessentially hetero-normative rite of passage: the awakening of his sexual desire

when he meets Ybón, a former prostitute. The role that prostitution plays in the novel, besides being significant, is thought-provoking since it reveals how it is women who enable men to achieve the socially constructed ideal of masculine domination –or its appearance. Oscar experiences this masculinity through the “ex”-prostitute Ybón, although in Oscar’s fantasy that episode is evidence of a lustful romance in the making. However, such a belief is misleading because Ybón is an experienced, highly-skilled seducer and has the ability to read Oscar’s mind and romantic longings. Therefore, I believe, she holds a power position in the affair with Oscar and satisfies him in ways rather unknown to him. In this way, Oscar nurtures the yet uncertain belief –a fantasy– that he is emotionally involved with a woman for the first time in his adulthood. Every time a chance for a romance had loomed in the past, Oscar thought it was going to be “his last fucking chance for happiness” (Díaz 2007:47) as when he met Ana Obregón. The same applies to Ybón whom he believed was his last chance to transit into full-fledged mature masculinity and, therefore, be socially accepted once and for all. Even though there is not a single economic transaction between Oscar and Ybón, they establish a bond that is based on Oscar’s ability to listen to other people:

She gave him a beer, had a double scotch, then for the next six hours regaled him with tales from her life. You could tell she hadn’t had anyone to talk to in a long time. Oscar reduced to nodding and trying to laugh when she laughed. The whole time he was sweating bullets. Wondering if this is when he should try something. (Díaz 2007: 281)

The narration of their encounters shows sympathy towards sex-workers in the Dominican Republic. It is very significant to acknowledge that the function of prostitution has allowed the development of the Dominican masculine stereotype as portayed in Díaz’s text. However, there exists a dismal reality behind the walls of

prostitution, which is that of an androcentric culture that denies women control over their bodies lest they are under the wing of a man –for example, pimps. Moreover, the novel suggests that the history of women in the microcosm of the novel is that of physical and emotional abuse –see Beli, Lola, Ybón– precisely to reinforce the position of males as breadwinners who can thus dictate their will. Beli, Lola and Ybón are the proof that the society of the novel consider women susceptible to be treated as whores, at the feet of men and prisoners of a social structure that reduces them to stereotypes.

In “Women Work, Men Sponge, and Everyone Gossips: Macho Men and Stigmatized/ing Women in a Sex Tourist Town” Denise Brennan writes at great length about the intrinsic aspects of prostitution in the Dominican Republic. Her discussion on the function that prostitution fulfills in the Dominican Republic helps to illustrate the harsh reality of the women that in the novel have to resort to prostitution to satisfy their material needs. Interestingly, it is also indicative of the existing jealousy among women that comes to the surface in the shape of gossip. The content of the article is conducive to establishing a parallelism with the scene in which La Inca and Beli inform Oscar of how Ybón paid for the house she lives in. The narration of the scene, as we will see later, also foregrounds the envy that arises in them. Brennan turns the spotlight on cash disposal to develop her argument, thus unmasking the scarce sistership among women resulting from a deeply-rooted male supremacy: “[w]omen’s migration strategies and earning power in the sex industry pose interesting questions about how women-as-breadwinners become the object of gossip particularly on how they spend money” (2004:706). Ybón, however ironic it may sound, represents female emancipation in the Dominican Republic because she owns her property, which is, in itself, a symbolic

triumph over androcentrism in the text. Paradoxically, Ybón's emancipation is a reason for other women to plot against her.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, we have seen how gender difference determines the fate of the protagonists, the inequalities at every single level that have arisen as a result of a profoundly misogynistic regime, and how the over-empowerment of men –except for Oscar– perpetuates males' status-quo in the Dominican Republic and in the textual representation of the Dominican diaspora in the United States. The section to come will analyze how women react to this androcentric structure in the United States by paying particular attention to Lola.

## **Representation of Femininity**

The story of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is mostly narrated by a male voice, Yunior, a womanizer. This form of narration is conducive to describing highly stereotyped representations of femininity, in which female sexuality nurtures the imagination of the eloquent narrative voice. Thus, the narrator exhibits the *machista* and misogynistic undertones inherited from the national Catholicism promoted by Trujillo's regime, and deeply rooted in the colonial ideology imposed by the Spaniards in the past. We will see in this section that the Dominican transnational identity, represented in the novel through testimonies of the first generation of Dominican-Americans to which Yunior belongs, maintains both this male-centered view and the objectification of the female body as an unquestionable trait of Dominican manhood. This view silences the



female voice and reduces it to instances in which the female body enables male fantasies. However, in the chapter “Wildwood”, in part one of the novel, the narrative voice shifts from Yuniór to Lola. In this way, the readers of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* access Lola’s mindset, and experience how other characters are perceived through the lens of a woman. The fact that Lola holds a power position in the narration of the story explains how “this [narrative] turn represents the beginning of [Lola’s] life as a transnational [body] who looks towards the future” (Durán-Almarza 2012:142). However, whether Lola’s looking forward will grant her the changes she longs for remains a mystery.

In “*Ciguapas* in New York: Transcultural Ethnicity and Transracialization in Dominican American Performance”, Durán-Almarza explores the construction of female Dominican identity from the perspective of migration. In doing so, she introduces the concept of the *ciguapa*,<sup>22</sup> which I consider key to better understand Lola as a character who seeks to express freely both female sexuality and desire in a male dominated text-world. Despite Lola’s partial failure in fully achieving such a goal, I still believe that Lola manages to successfully confront Beli, who, to some extent, functions in the novel as a female agent of patriarchy. Lola and Beli fight each other, and sympathy is conspicuous by its absence in their relationship: “[q]ue muchacha tan fea, she said in disgust, splashing the rest of her coffee in the sink” or “[t]he last time she tried to whale on me it was because of my hair, but instead of cringing or running I punched her hand” (Díaz 2007: 54-55). Beli dictates the rules in the household and a feeling of profound hatred arises within Lola as she has the impression that Beli has done nothing to deserve that position of authority. Lola feels she has had to carve

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<sup>22</sup> A Ciguapa is a mythological creature of Dominican folklore. Source: Wikipedia.org In this case, it is representative of female sexuality and beauty; hence, my association of it with Lola’s character.

herself with her own hands. The following description of their daily life underlines Lola's taking up enormous responsibility in the household:

I stayed at home and made sure Oscar was fed and that everything ran right while she was at work. *I raised him and I raised me*. I was the one. You're my hija, she said, that's what you're supposed to be doing. When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name. All you do is complain, she said to me. But you have no idea what life really is. (Díaz 2007: 56-7)

Beli's attitude is what further feeds Lola's desire to escape from the oppressive atmosphere in the house. Lola's beauty, playfulness and aesthetic relish are her identity markers and her way out from said atmosphere. On many occasions, Yunior describes Lola in flattering terms. He underscores the beauty of her playful legs, the greatness of her breasts, and how shorts fit her like a dream. Lola, in much the same way as Beli with Dionisio, is aware of her looks and the effects her fancy outfits have on men, takes advantage of it to seduce Aldo and have an affair with him. Lola runs away from home because, by then, the situation has turned unbearable and takes shelter in Aldo to show her disagreement with Beli. In Durán-Almarza's insightful article, she argues how the *ciguapa's* penetrating call "is not to attract men, as the legend goes, but to express her feelings of alienation and despair" (2012:143). Lola appears concerned with the exploration of power and the fact that Beli constantly cuts her wings puts Lola in dire need of reconsidering her role in the family. The tension reaches its peak when Lola annoys Beli while the latter informs Oscar and Lola about the progress of her disease. Lola's rudeness irks Beli, and she blurts out: "[h]ija de tu maldita madre, she shrieked. And I said: This time I hope you die from it" (Díaz 2007: 63). All the above examples,

besides illustrating the ill-fated relationship between Beli and Lola, demonstrate the struggle for power in the domestic sphere; hence, the hysteric reactions that unfold whenever their lack of power being curtailed by one another. In La Inca's ironic words: "[i]t was like the fight between the egg and the rock [...] No winning" (Díaz 2007:70). After Lola's involvement with Aldo, Beli sends her to the Dominican Republic under La Inca's attentive supervision. In the Dominican Republic, Lola's sexuality and awareness of her femininity grows stronger: "I can't wear shorts anymore without causing traffic jams and the other day when my abuela locked us out of the house she turned to me in frustration and said, Hija, just kick the door open" (Díaz 2007:71). This instance, besides illustrating Lola's unequivocal attractiveness, also suggests her physical strength. These two attributes are inherent in Lola's personality and the exploration of power through her bubbling sexuality is what ultimately creates a state of chaos between Beli and Lola. Much to Beli's chagrin, Lola can't avoid becoming embroiled in tortuous affairs.

The novel establishes a connection between female characters and prostitution through Lola and Ybón. In fact, female subjectivities are reflected very much on their bodies and on their physical appearance because, thus, women delay their internal debates regarding the position they actually occupy in the society of the novel. This underlines that the microcosm of the novel offers little space for contestation and explains why a rebellious character such as Lola becomes submissive in the long run – she marries a man towards the end of the novel and goes back again and again to Yuniór despite his infidelities and humiliations. Women's stifling situation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is centered around the idea that the text-world is marketed for and directed by men, and that allows the novel to show women's vulnerability to

patriarchy as a deeply seated cultural trait in Dominican culture. Therefore, it might be argued that, in the complex misogynistic environment that Díaz creates to illustrate his gendered fictionalization of the Dominican Republic, successful femininity relies on its capacity to attract men of diverse nature. The proximity of those men to the authority contributes to reinforcing the role of the state in women's submission to male interests. The political sphere is again involved in the scene when Lola nurtures the sexual fantasies of her best friend's father. This is the moment in her life when Lola prostitutes herself:

He was the father of one of my classmates. Always after me, even when his daughter was around, so I called him. One thing you can count on in Santo Domingo. Not the lights, not the law.

Sex.

That never goes away.

I didn't bother with the romance. I let him take me to a love motel on our first "date". He was one of those vain politicians, a peledista, had his own big air-conditioned jípetá. When I pulled my pants down you never saw anybody so happy.

Until I asked him for two thousand dollars. American, I emphasized.

It's like Abuela says: Every snake always thinks it's biting into a rat until the day it bites into a mongoose.

*That was my big puta moment.* I knew he had the money, otherwise I wouldn't have asked, and it's not like I was robbing from him. *I think we did it like nine times in total, so in my opinion he got a lot more than he gave.* Afterward I sat in the motel and drank rum while he snorted from these little bags of coke. (Díaz 2007: 206 italics added)

In this context, prostitution creates a space in which a dominant masculinity develops and Lola's femininity –and power– is subject to a process of submission and vulnerability. Not to mention the fact that Lola is underage when this happens so legal

consequences may have ensued. However, the politician shows no remorse for it; he rather shows satisfaction for having hooked up with Lola after several failed attempts.

The connections between the state structures and the objectification of women are a persistent feature in the narrative. Beli is also a good example of it as we have seen in chapter two. Indeed, this questionable social code is a practice enshrined by the state –as we have also seen in Lola’s and Ybón’s case– that the very same state enforces in order to perpetuate the image of the Dominican macho as a distinctive ethos of Dominican culture. In “Female Sex Tourism: A Contradiction in Terms”, Sánchez-Taylor sheds light on the function of prostitution in the Dominican Republic as well as the social structures that arise from these encounters. The recognition of prostitution both as a commercial activity that operates as a social leveler in the Dominican Republic and that also dictates gender roles heightens the system of internal and gender dependencies. She argues that: “sexual behavior reflects and reproduces weaknesses in existing theoretical and commonsense understandings of gendered power, sexual exploitation, prostitution and sex tourism” (2006:42). This is a practice male characters boast about in the novel, and this action reduces women to stereotypes that are almost exclusively constructed in the mindset of manhood and, even worse, widely internalized by women, who lack an alternative role model and get thus trapped in the miseries of a profoundly patriarchal system of rules. In the microcosm of the novel, the female cast of characters assumes this pattern with no more resistance than a tantrum, in their attempt at dispelling the negativity that those actions generate in her. In this way, the text criticizes the well-orchestrated war on women that both the Dominican Republic and its diaspora have nurtured.

In her analysis of Dominican national identity, critic Andrea E. Morris explores both the role and the significance of women in the process of constructing Dominicanness. Thus, in her article “‘Yania Tierra’: Enterrando el cuerpo de la madre patria”. Morris quotes Catharina Vallejo and argues that: “[l]a madre (-patria) constituye el símbolo de la nación –sufriente, abandonada y sangrada– y las características de ese símbolo la transforma a la vez en las cualidades de la mujer dominicana ideal, cualidades que serán prescritas para las mujeres dominicanas, históricas y concretas” (qtd in Morris 2006: 182). This quote accurately illustrates the representation of the (diasporic) Dominican women in the novel, especially that of Beli, whose troubled subjectivity and alienation from society particularly develops, after the episode in the cane fields, as a double recipient of male and state violence. The internalization of those traits and her becoming a female agent of patriarchy is what constantly undermines her relationship with Lola, her estrangement from La Inca, and her inability to love anymore. In this way, she becomes the archetype of a hardened immigrant in the United States in what might be regarded as an act of survival.

So far we have seen how the construction of Dominican national identity is principally male-centered and also the extent to which this affects the female psyche. The novel informs the readers of the large number of existing inequalities that are rooted in gendered identities. The parameters in which the construction of gender takes place, and that I have dealt with, articulate a profoundly misogynistic society with a discourse and social practices that drag women into servitude, dislocation and displacement.

## Conclusions

This research is part of a larger project in which I am going to discuss in greater detail the aspects that surround the construction and representation of diasporic masculinities in the work of Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz. After the completion of this Master's thesis, I have arrived at the conclusion that the field of Dominican Studies remains largely unexplored. The more so when part of the research concentrates on the analysis of a topic as controversial as the representation of sexuality. Whereas there seems to be a vast range of sources openly dealing with sex tourism, sex tourist towns or sex-workers, the exploration of non-normative masculinities and/or Dominican sexualities seems to remain hidden for the most part. Nevertheless, it is also true that there are more and more researchers keen to dig into this topic in order to portray the also fast changing social structure of the Dominican Republic. This is so, in part, and as I have tried to make evident, due to the reciprocal influences of Dominican and American cultures in the modes of diasporic representation. Both the novel and this research set forth the principle that whatever people or readers call Dominican is the result of a vast range of cultural encounters and political regimes of diverse nature. In the process of writing this Master's thesis I realized that the connections I assumed earlier among politics, diaspora and sexuality are a matter of fact because it is the diaspora, thanks to the spread of technology, that raises the question of the exploration of alternative modes of representation.

In order to establish the aforementioned connections, I have studied the representation of Trujillo's dictatorship that, in itself, functions as a central motif in the novel to illustrate the straightforward connections between the issues of diaspora and politics. The Dominican diaspora in the United States clearly responds to a political

crisis generated not only by the dictatorship, but also by the deeply-rooted colonial ideology enforced, in turn, by Trujillo himself and the growing presence of the US empire in the decision-making process of the Dominican Republic. Additionally, I have found arguments in support of the hypothesis that the diasporic movements generated by the Trujillato have resulted, as the novel illustrates, into the development of a Dominican culture that often preserves and extends the original culture. This can be observed both in the psychological development of the diasporic Dominicans in the novel as well as in the cultural practices these individuals embrace in their daily routines. As for the connections between politics and gender and sexuality, I believe that the impact of the policies circulated by Trujillo are, in fact, written on the characters' bodies in that the iron fist rule of the dictator determined Dominicans' degree of individual freedom. The national Catholicism ideology enforced by Trujillo has played a significant role in the regulation of the sexual liberties and rights of the Dominicans, and it has especially affected women. Thus, women and non-normative masculinities have become the target of state-retaliation and humiliation. All the above aspects are conducive to considering, at least, the formation of a distinctive ethos in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that seeks to be inclusive; hence, the representation of a monolithic sexual and cultural identity. My analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* offers a different reading of the novel in which the centrality of politics explains the, in some aspects, countercultural articulation of a Dominican identity that opposes, rejects and resists the lasting and long shadow of Trujillo.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, identity revolves around three major possible interpretations— diasporic, transnational and postcolonial – resulting from the complex picture inherited from the Trujillo era. Even though the most dominant



representation of identity is the diasporic one given the fact that Beli initiates the journey to the United States, we cannot overlook neither the postcolonial component of Dominican identity that Trujillo reproduced during the dictatorship nor the transnational one if we bear in mind that in Oscar's and Lola's case home is also the United States. The fact that the novel portrays three generations of Dominicans gives insights into the far reaching consequences of dislocation, while it also provides an overall picture of the different processes of identity formation that emerge in the text. The Dominican postcolonial identity, result of the conquest and subsequent territorial occupation of the island by the Spaniards, gains visibility in the novel through the code-switching phenomenon that I have pointed out in my analysis of the novel. In my writing, I interweave the terms coined by James Clifford –roots and routes– with Lola, Oscar and Beli to demonstrate to what extent the postcolonial root is present both in the novel and in the lives of said characters. In the novel, the active renegotiation of identity takes place within the frame of an increasingly transnational reality that underlines the imperative need to articulate a transnational response to the challenges set in motion in Díaz's text. Therefore, the regeneration of the social fabric presented in the text depends on the characters' ability to navigate the muddy legacy of the complex socio-political history of a land that has historically been exposed to encounters with different empires.

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