

DISPELLING THE COLONIAL CURSE: A “BRIEF” WONDROUS ANALYSIS OF JUNOT
DÍAZ’ OSCAR WAO

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“No matter how far you travel - - to whatever reaches of this limitless universe - - you will never be - - ALONE!” (Lee & Kirby, 2009).

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Introduction

The immigrant experience, a prominent feature of the literary canon of the United States, has broadened readers’ cultural outlook and has even defined American culture (Hirschman, 2013, p. 15). Today, in postmodern times, first- and second-generation immigrant writers are approaching and broadening the horizons of how readers engage with American literature by contending with topics such as displacement, family, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, society, politics, and history in their creative work.

Since the release of the short story collection *Drown* in 1996, fiction writer Junot Díaz, who was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and moved with his family to New Jersey when he was just six years old, has emerged as an influential author of migrant literature (Fenell, 2015, pp. 2–3). His books, especially the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* published in 2007, have established him as a powerful voice in literary circles; his narratives appeal to a large Latino demographic in the United States as well as to readers of other origins across the world (USC Rossier, 2013).

His fiction is short, blunt, and engaging. Nonetheless, his critical approach to storytelling has secured him a place in the history of the American literary canon (Ebensberger, 2017). His novel in particular widens the scope of American letters as it provides new insights into the Dominican-American experience, all the while exposing readers to contexts that they otherwise would be unaware of and that further inform the voice of the Dominican immigrant. The United States has equipped several generations of writers for expanding its canon, and it is now Junot Díaz who nurtures an audience that can specially take notice of such a voice in retrospect and attest to other realities outside of their homeland.

Díaz’ portrayal of the Dominican diaspora community through the use of both English and Spanish affords readers the opportunity to witness the difficulties, the estrangement, the heartbreak, the loss, and the shared intimacies of characters who feel socioculturally “out of place.” He is part of a generation of Antillean authors who live in-between countries: Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American short story writer and novelist; Anthony Kellman, a Barbadian-American poet and novelist who also composes and performs music; Marie-Elena John, an Antiguan-American writer and a gender issues adviser at the United Nations, and so forth—all of whom put in their own way the distress of deracination they endured in their lives.

Regarding his conspicuous writing style, Díaz concocts a linguistic cocktail in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his debut novel, by fusing American-English slang and argots with allusions to the speculative genres—that is, fantasy and science fiction—along with references to historical figures, such as Christopher Columbus, Rafael Trujillo, John F. Kennedy, Porfirio Rubirosa, the Mirabal sisters, Richard Nixon, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Ronald Reagan, to intertwine Dominican with American history. Díaz thus deliberately merges a wide array of literary devices to unfold his novel against a backdrop of postcolonialism, autocracy, and exile all the while rendering the hardships of living as a child of the diaspora.

This essay offers an in-depth analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* for the current time and does so by dissecting it through two critical approaches: new and sociological criticism. Resorting to the most recent journalistic and academic work on Díaz’ novel, the main focus of this monograph is to examine the influence of the *fukú* curse on the lives of the members of the Cabral-de León family. In the process, however, other subjects ranging from *colonialism*, *racism*, and *hypermasculinity* to *zafa*, *culture*, and *realism versus fantasy* are dealt with throughout the text.

Hence, *Dispelling the Colonial Curse: A “Brief” Wondrous Analysis of Junot Díaz’* Oscar Wao delves into Díaz’ narrative by situating his work within the frame of wider critical, literary, and sociohistorical contexts. Finally, this essay draws upon the priceless contributions by professors, researchers, journalists, and others who allow for seeing Díaz’ magnum opus through a different optic, giving readers as well as interested parties the chance to access insightful information and engage in informed conversations about his novel.

Biography

Junot Díaz was born to Virtudes and Rafael Díaz in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, on December 31, 1968, and grew up in the lower-middle-class sector of Villa Juana as the middle of five children (Martinez, 2007, pp. 76–77). His father was a “pro-dictator, crypto-fascist” (Sagal, 2013) police soldier who instilled in his boys a strong military ethic; he also encouraged them to learn martial arts and practice firearm shooting in a rifle range.

During his childhood, Díaz inhabited a city with scant basic amenities, with scarcity of running water and unreliable electricity supply, and teeming with civil unrest and high rates of political murder (Ring, Salkin, & La Boda, 2010, p. 644). His grandmother, one of the first people who sparked his interest in storytelling, would tell him fantasy folktales about curses, monsters, dreams, and ancestors. Although he did not believe in what she narrated, the stories kept him “ceaselessly delighted” (Davies, 2012).

In 1974, when incumbent Joaquín Balaguer and former counselor of Trujillo, the country’s larger-than-life despot, was reelected to the presidency and the future of the Dominican Republic looked grim, the Díaz family decided to emigrate to Parlin, New Jersey, arriving in December of the same year. In the early 1980s, his father, who had gone earlier to the United States, abandoned them and his family lived in poverty for many years (Jaggi, 2008). Díaz’ mother thus had to work at a chocolate factory to earn their keep (Marriot, 2008).

Learning English was a daunting task that drove Díaz to delve into comics and literature, and he became a voracious reader at the age of seven, veering from biographies of famous Americans to Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective fiction (Knight, n.d.). He was not a role model for other students as he reportedly earned low grades in high school (GradeSaver, n.d.); although he skipped class for 90 days, he graduated from Cedar Ridge High School in 1987 (Adkins, 2013, p.

93). He then attended Kean College and a year later transferred to Rutgers, and meanwhile he worked at Raritan River Steel, a steel plant shut in 2009 (Haydon, 2009), and delivering pool tables (Díaz, 2010).

As a freshman at Rutgers, he realized that he wanted to be a writer when he read Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros, asserting that “it all clicked—that writing was all I wanted to do. It became my calling” (Vitzhum, 2012). After finishing his undergraduate studies, he was accepted into Cornell University as a master of fine arts (MFA) major, but he had no recollection of applying. He was stunned as his girlfriend at the time had submitted the application for him in secret (Rangno & Meyers, 2010, p. 117). His early works consisted of scriptwriting but, when he perceived that one of his professors favored a student who was writing a shark-attack screenplay over him, his focus shifted to literary fiction (Celayo & Shook, 2008).

Receiving his MFA in fiction writing with a thesis entitled *Negocios* in 1995 (Cornell University, n.d.), Díaz published “Ysrael,” his first piece of prose fiction, in *Story* the autumn of that year (González, 2015, p. 165). In 1996, Riverhead Books published his first book, the short story collection *Drown*, which was met with critical acclaim while widely regarded as a noteworthy breakthrough in literature (Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, n.d.). From 1997, he taught writing at Syracuse University, but in 2002, he resigned this position to become a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Martinez, 2007, p. 77).

Suffering from years of depression and self-loathing, he worked on a novel about a slightly futuristic version of the United States where a psychic terrorist destroys New York City, but the September 11 attacks rendered it unworkable (Rothschild, 2008). Fighting “a perfect storm of insecurity and madness and pressure” (Kachka, 2007) in trying to write his next book, he experienced an epiphany when he picked up a copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and

pronounced Oscar Wilde’s last name as “Wao,” something that stayed with him, as he told BookBrowse (2007) in an interview,

and next thing you know, I had this vision of a poor, doomed ghetto nerd, the kind of ghetto nerd I would have been had I not been discovered by girls the first year out of high school . . . But Oscar wouldn’t stop hanging out in my head, and I realized that I wanted to write an entire novel about a Dominican kid who doesn’t get the girls, who can’t dance, who is the opposite of all the stereotypes that we inside the Dominican community have about “our men.”

The end result, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, published by Riverhead Books in 2007 as Díaz’ debut novel—almost 11 years after the release of *Drown*—went on to win the John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008, and many other accolades (Aloi, 2008). In 2012, his second collection of short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her*, about “relationships more generally” (Bennett, 2012), came out and had a positive reception from news and media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post* (Penguin Random House, n.d.).

That same year, Díaz also revealed that a science-fiction novel entitled *Monstro*, based on his eponymous short story featured in *The New Yorker*, was in the works (Wired, 2012). However, the novel-in-progress seems to have been dropped. In an interview for Words on a Wire in 2015, when inquired about the development of *Monstro*, Díaz stated “Yeah, I’m not writing that book anymore” (KTEP, 2015). Recently, in 2017, it was announced that *Islandborn*, Díaz’ first picture book, is scheduled for publication in spring 2018 as part of a promise he made to his goddaughters 20 years ago that he would write a book with “characters like them, Dominican girls living in the Bronx” (Alter, 2017).

Antecedents

Junot Díaz has carved out a space for himself on the selves of Latino and American literature as the author of fiction centered around the Dominican immigrant experience in the United States (Johnson, 2008), drawing heavily on his personal experiences as a Dominican American. His novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, like the work of other Caribbean authors—particularly Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, which Díaz credits as a major influence on his novel (Authors@Google, 2007)—faces history from that “serious” phenomenon called humor because it is persuasive in a way to convey their harrowing reality. This is why the tacit narrator of the prologue, Yunior, emphatically says, when referring to Trujillo,

he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. (p. 270)

Díaz, by contrast, does not fully accept the ideological framework of historians and storytellers who have tried to capture the appalling reality of the Trujillo era by traditional means. In large part because of this, he critiques Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel *The Feast of the Goat*; Vargas Llosa’s use of conventional realism perpetuates the dictator’s figure, while Díaz’ “semiotic frame articulated by references to fantasy and science fiction” (Figuerola, 2013) seeks to undermine it. In this regard, the latter elaborates,

Vargas Llosa’s [*The Feast of the Goat*] is a great novel, but he speaks of our dictatorship as if it were Peru. And I, the son of a fascist, realized that he had not captured [our] reality. Maybe because [*The Feast of the Goat*] was too realistic. (Lambies, 2013)

In the novel, references to games, comics, fantasy, and science fiction abound, from the first epigraph to the last chapter of the book. The presence of quotes from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* along with allusions to Marvel and DC Comics superheroes and villains, among many other inventions of the same nature, allow the narrator to paint the world of the protagonists, especially Oscar’s. This is noticeable when Yuniór says with respect to him, “Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa . . . , knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic . . . Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens” (p. 26). Herbert’s *Dune* saga also serves as a metaphor throughout the novel. Concerning Abelard, for instance, Yuniór observes, “He tried to remain calm—fear, as *Dune* teaches us, is the mind killer—but he could not help himself” (p. 194).

Yuniór, for his part, in one of Oscar’s final cards (p. 265), is referred to as “Count Fenris,” possibly as a reference to Count Hasimir Fenring, an enigmatic and powerful yet libertine character from the *Dune* universe, whereas Lola is called a “Bene Gesserit Witch,” also from *Dune*, regarding a group of women whose goal was to lead humanity to advancement and salvation. Moreover, the Trujillo regime, which functions as the backdrop of the story, is equated with “a Caribbean Mordor in many ways” (p. 184); a place where Sauron, the main antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, formed swarms of Trolls and Orcs along with other humanoid races while corrupting the hearts of Men in the process.

Furthermore, based on Lee Clark Mitchell’s (2017, p. 231) notes in *Mere Reading: The Poetics of Wonder in Modern American Novels*, the references do not end there but rather extend beyond the aforementioned genres, encompassing classic literature and authors. By way of illustration, when Lola is planning to run away from her mother, she thinks of convincing Oscar to go with her to Dublin, where he “could become the Dominican James Joyce” (p. 64).

What is more, Beli is likened to Captain Ahab, a fictional character in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, for her tenacious infatuation with Jack Pujols, “the school’s handsomest (read: whitest) boy” (p. 80). In addition, there is a citation from Melville’s magnum opus with no quotation marks at the beginning of subchapter “Hunt the Light Knight,” where “whale” is replaced by “boy”: “And of all these things the albino boy was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?” (p. 85). Later on, in subchapter “Truth and Consequences 2,” Yunior comments in relation to Beli, “Well, maybe Dickens would have her run an orphanage” (p. 120), as an allusion to Charles Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist*.

By the same token, in Lola’s transformation into “un mujerón total” (p. 82), Yunior cunningly invokes W. B. Yeats’ poem “Easter, 1916” by saying, “*a terrible beauty has been born*” (p. 82). In like manner, when Lola arrives in Santo Domingo and sees La Inca, Yunior remarks “She stood like she was her own best thing” (p. 70) as an outright reference to Sethe’s noted statement in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Even Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* seems omnipresent in Lola, whose real first name is Dolores, but also in the first-person narration of her chapter entitled “Wildwood 1982-1985.”

This never-ending connection with other works of literature compels scholars and critics to suggest different readings of the novel, stemming from their own beliefs and research. An example of this is the Man Without a Face, also known as the Faceless One (p. 136), who not only appears in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* but also seemingly in “Ysrael” and “No Face,” both short stories from *Drown*, where a boy wears a mask to hide his disfigured face. Whereas Jason Cortés (2015) states he functions as the “embodiment” (p. 100) of the fukú curse, Jill Toliver Richardson (2016) posits “that the faceless man represents the potential to rewrite and alter the course of history” (p. 31).

In a GoodReads (2012) interview, Díaz himself asserted that if he provides “the answer, it robs the reader of their role.” Much earlier, however, in another interview, he linked it to *The Wizard of Oz* and everything it inspired, specifically “Zardoz from (wiZARD of OZ)” (Miranda, 2009, p. 37), finally adding that “there’s always these references in the book to people with masks. There are references to masks behind masks” (Miranda, 2009, p. 37). In the end, the possibilities for interpretation are endless as Díaz continues to combine pop culture with literary fiction, all of which make up the antecedents to his novel.

Theoretical Framework

The issues Díaz tackles in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can arguably be analyzed and studied through new and sociological criticism, since it is by virtue of his imagination as a fiction writer that he is able to conceive and represent alternative visions of the logic of the Dominican society. Accordingly, the aforementioned critical approaches are used as a framework for poring over the sociocultural and political connotations that stem from Díaz’ novel.

As part of what Anglophone researchers Lynette Spillman and Mark D. Jacobs have described as the “cultural turn”—that is, “a shift in emphasis toward meaning and away from positivist epistemology” (Painter, 2017, p. 4), this monograph subscribes to the emergent scholarship on the multigenerational, interdisciplinary, and comparative perspectives of such a turn. Particularly, it is meant to look upon *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a critical novel for exploring, understanding, and examining the abiding effects of colonialism, multiculturalism, and racism in the Americas, more specifically the United States and the Dominican Republic.

Whereas the crux of new criticism is explanation or a “close reading of the work itself” (Delahoyde, n.d.), sociological criticism delves into “the relationships between the artist and society” (Padgett, n.d.). By resorting to the former, it is not necessary to know why or how the novel was written in the first place. It relies on the text itself as the primary source of rigorous study. Such a formalist approach allows for arriving at a seemingly objective take on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, showing how all its narrative elements function as a unit. In a sense, it is not about accepting the novel at face value as if it were literal truth, but rather about scrutinizing its content, rooting out its inner tensions, in order to discover its hidden meanings.

In doing so, formal elements such as setting, language, and plot are used to identify the subjects of the narrative, which range from colonialism and racism to culture and realism versus fantasy. In addition to this, probing literary devices such as *fukú* and *zafa* helps establish a unified reading of the novel, without the need for subtitles or divisions within it. Because of this, the analysis can be read as a stream of rich, insightful, and dispassionate interpretations of an author’s work, as new critics would argue (Bizzaro, 1993, p. 226; Culler, 2000, p. 122).

In Díaz’ case, it has projective power since his work not only is geared toward the entertainment of an audience but also toward the transformation of a society’s mores, as it restlessly invokes a past tainted with violence and impunity that lingers on to the present day. It is a story of extremes, of the trials and tribulations of an immigrant saga and, ultimately, of living under the shadow of dictatorship.

Díaz’ recounting of the horrors of dictatorship and its influence on the lives of generations of immigrants all form part of this critical stance that is typical of Latinos and their yearning to unfold their histories. More often than not, it includes narratives that are sordid and that usually cope with the horrors of dictatorship, such as those with undertones of hypermasculinity and that do not falter in confronting the most complex questions about racism and identity. Furthermore, some critics (Asim, 2007; Connors, 2008) contend that Díaz’ work is sharp and forlorn, but the author commented otherwise in an interview,

What’s unfortunate is that where I came up, and I can’t talk about anyone else, seeing things too clearly was considered negative. If you point that this thing [pointing to a bottle] has a crack in it, people think you’re a negative person and that you’re not optimistic. I always think that true optimism is demonstrating that even though there is a crack, that the bottle still has value, still is beautiful. (Miranda, 2009, p. 32)

The world Díaz pictures in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has many cracks in it, though, in stark contrast to what the bottle analogy posits. It is a world that is plagued with age-old issues of dictatorship and sexism, a world not built around compassion but rather exclusion. This is notoriously evinced in the life experiences of Oscar, Lola, and Beli since they bear witness to a society awash with contentions of racial discrimination, sexual oppression, and gender inequality. New and sociological criticism is thus key to dissecting the dominant discourses of prejudice in Díaz’ novel and to discerning their underlying assumptions and wider implications within its larger sociopolitical context.

Dispelling the Colonial Curse: A “Brief” Wondrous Analysis of Junot Díaz’ *Oscar Wao*

It is often the case that immigrants end up glorifying their cultural mores and origins, constantly and enthusiastically praising their indigenous values. Over time, however, changes occur in the countries where they were born and grew up in. As a result, a dissonance is created between the cultural mores that persist in the displaced people and those that now prevail within the society of their country of origin. This dissonance causes them to feel they no longer belong to either culture—seen as backwards and outmoded in their native land and never truly accepted in the new.

The fukú curse that Díaz portrays in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is linked with the characters’ inner conflicts caused by the dichotomy between living in the United States and maintaining cultural roots that stretch all the way to the Dominican Republic. This creates a cultural identity crisis: an utter state of shock and confusion that will not abate until one has accepted change with time.

Accordingly, this essay will examine the influence of the fukú curse on the lives of the characters of the Cabral-de León family in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. Fukú is not only defined as pertaining to the realm of the magical or supernatural but also belongs to the historical world of colonialism, multiculturalism, and racism. Zafa, on the other hand, is a counterspell of sorts and differentiates itself by providing a temporary solution to the problems of dictatorship and the condemnation of the conquest of the New World.

Yunior retroactively retells the events of the Cabral-de León family history, especially with regard to the fukú curse. However, the novel begins not with Oscar’s family history, but rather with a historical account of fukú, whose provenance Yunior traces to the first confrontations between European colonists and the indigenous peoples of the Americas,

expressly mentioning the Tainos and enslaved Africans. It is the people of Africa who end up being an object of contempt in the Americas.

In essence, the narrative shifts through time in a nonlinear pattern, weaving present-day with decades-old history and switches focus among members of the Cabral-de León family, especially Beli, Lola, and Oscar. The order of their introduction, Oscar first, Lola second, and Beli third, particularly frames the novel. They embody two key aspects of the Dominican diasporic experience: Oscar and Lola as United States citizens with deep Dominican roots that compel them to revisit the island of Hispaniola for long periods of time, and Beli as the Dominican immigrant who barely manages to escape her own annihilation in her motherland. The three of them exhibit characteristic unsettledness and travel back and forth to the Dominican Republic as the plot unfolds.

The main character, Oscar, seeks to cure his fukú by immersing himself in a world of fantasy and science-fiction stories. He tries to break the curse with the last woman he meets, Ybón, who has roots in Africa and the part of Hispaniola that is a perpetual hotbed of racism. The fukú curse ends up being a harbinger of continuous suffering, an existential crisis that does not allow its victims to transcend the limitations of their hypermasculine culture and racism.

Fukú is a curse continuously endured by the novel’s characters, especially Oscar and his relatives, who are constantly disillusioned with their social milieu. The fukú curse is forged on the anvil of prejudice, with the two-headed hammer of fear and ignorance, exacerbated by the remaining cultural prejudices of Dominican society about the racial and sexual perceptions that still pervade their psyche. This makes them a parenthesis; a side-note, part of, but not fully participating in the full societal sentence, continually setting them apart from their environment.

Throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz tackles the historical drama of the Dominican Republic caused by its dictators. Balaguer, one of them, is alluded to in the novel as “the Election Thief,” “the Humunculus,” and “the demon” (p. 307). In addition, he is referred to as a “Negrophobe, an apologist of genocide, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez” (p. 307).

Trujillo, the country’s larger-than-life despot, on the other hand, is known as “El Jefe, The Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface” (p. 270) and his dictatorship is described as a dark period but above all as a “culocracy” (p. 177) due to his rapacious sexual appetite and lust for young women, going as far as “fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates” (p. 270). If rewriting history is one of the main motifs in the novel, the hegemony of Dominican masculinity is one of its central aspects. Oscar, the titular protagonist, is the antithesis of what Dominican masculinity represents both inside and outside the island of Hispaniola:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachetero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him). (p. 18)

The Dominican Republic under the Trujillo dictatorship, which Oscar’s mother was forced to flee, is not the same as the Dominican Republic that existed at the time Díaz wrote his novel. The protagonists travel between the Dominican Republic, where the curse was born, and the United States, where it is easily assimilated into the immigrant subculture of North America. This, despite the slowly changing values of post-Trujillo Dominican society, causes them to hang

on to antiquated values and beliefs that ultimately prevent their full assimilation into and acceptance of North American society.

Yunior narrates Lola’s family history, his girlfriend, by dint of Oscar, the title character, covering three successive generations, starting with that of the grandparents, Abelard and Socorro Cabral, subdued by Trujillo’s rule after refusing to introduce him to their “Golden Child,” Jacquelyn, who “had been the object of not four, not five, but twelve marriage proposals” (p. 187) in one year alone. The second generation consists of Hypatia Belicia “Beli” Cabral, the only surviving daughter, who never got to meet her parents since she was separated from them at birth, “sold to complete strangers in another part of Azua” (p. 206), and finally emigrated to the United States. The third generation is that of Beli’s children, Oscar and Dolores “Lola” de León, who fail at first to see the logic behind fukú but eventually come to understand it.

Oscar, for his part, tries to figure out what fukú is by comparing it to the mythology of his fantasy and science-fiction books, defining it as “the Ancient Powers” (p. 253) or using its strength to become tougher, as Yunior puts it, “Unus the Untouchable” (p. 256). In effect, Oscar lives for and among fiction or “his interest in Genres” (p. 22), as Yunior calls it, making it his world.

However, Oscar’s blackness and obesity set him up as the laughingstock of his friends and relatives. For example, his sister criticizes him constantly and warns him repeatedly, “you’re going to die a virgin unless you start *changing*” (p. 28). His male friends reject him because he is no bachatero or womanizer, even though they are “fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing” (p. 31) aficionados like him. It is no wonder that Lola admonishes him to change. Despite Oscar having his mother’s Dominican roots, he is absolutely unfamiliar with her country of origin, but at the same time is dominated and held prisoner by it.

Apparently, fukú acts upon those who suffer from identity crises, especially Dominicans of African descent who refuse to admit their origins. Oscar, Lola, Beli, and even Yuniór, all suffer from identity crises. Even so, America gives Dominicans the opportunity to reclaim their African heritage. One can see this already happening in the use of African-American vernacular English and particularly the word “nigger,” which appears frequently in Díaz’ novel.

Through Yuniór, the narrator, Díaz appeals to a discourse that weaves in and out of the native land of his characters. Not only do they travel between Paterson and Santo Domingo but also switch from English to Spanish, moving between different social strata as well. The novel is brimming with intertexts, mostly from science-fiction and fantasy literature (e.g., J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Marvel Comics’ *The Fantastic Four*, Edgar Rice Burroughs’ series of *Martian* novels, Frank Herbert’s *Dune* saga, and DC Comics’ *Teen Titans*). Moreover, references to H. P. Lovecraft, H. G. Wells, Robert E. Howard, Isaac Asimov, Ben Bova, Robert A. Heinlein, E. E. “Doc” Smith, Andre Norton, and Octavia Butler are also made.

Díaz plays with many other issues throughout the novel: (a) sexual assault (when Lola “was in fourth grade she’d been attacked by an older acquaintance, and this was common knowledge [in her] family” [p. 28]); (b) violence in Dominican society and how it is perpetuated in every generation (since “It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond” [p. 12]); and (c) poverty in the Dominican Republic (“Outer Azua is one of the poorest areas in the DR; it is a wasteland, our own homegrown sertão . . . Even the residents could have passed for survivors of some not-so-distant holocaust” [p. 298]). The author himself acknowledges this on an annotated version of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, “the poverty . . . I certainly never forgot it” (Genius, 2013).

Time and again, Díaz also scrutinizes the ways Dominicans internalize and externalize institutionalized abuse and exploitation and how pop culture affects his characters’ yearnings and identities. For instance, as a teenager, Beli lies to her friend, Dorea, about her high school life, bearing on the lyrics of love songs. Yuniór notes,

This jiringonza was in the *air*, it was the dreamshit that they fed girls day and night. It’s surprising Beli could think of anything else, what with that heavy rotation of boleros, canciones, and versos spinning in her head, with the *Listín Diario*’s society pages spread before her. Beli at thirteen believed in love like a seventy-year-old widow who’s been abandoned by family, husband, children, and fortune believes in God. (p. 79)

Although the meaning of “jiringonza” is not stated, it probably means “a language or communication hard to interpret as it is phrased in a somewhat modified vocabulary like lotsa slang or argot” (Jiringonza, n.d.).

Similarly, her son, Oscar, will alternatively stuff his head with sci-fi and fantasy literature that frames his identity and spurs him on to acts of hapless heroism: “They walked him into the cane . . . He tried to stand bravely . . . over there he wouldn’t be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he’d be a hero, an avenger” (pp. 257–258). With such events, the narrative expressly shows the role of pop culture in the characters’ yearnings and courses of action.

Nevertheless, throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the moral dilemmas that the characters face in their lives have their origin in the fukú curse mentioned at the beginning of the novel. It is indeed a supernatural force that hinders Dominicans, specifically dark-complexioned Dominicans, from attaining a deeper sense of Black identity and acceptance.

Since the fukú curse comes from Africa as a result of Columbus’ settlement on the island of Hispaniola, it seems that the African curse functions as a reprisal against the enslaved people.

As a matter of fact, fukú is as closely tied to Africa as it is to Oscar’s mother and sister. Díaz, while refraining from taking a didactic approach to the prejudice of race, nonetheless resolutely accepts the African legacy of his Dominican culture through dark, sardonic humor, Black English, and the development of characters who are remarkably dark-complexioned in ways that keep them from easy assimilation into the larger, dominant group. Following this pattern, Oscar is an archetype representing the risks involved in assimilation.

It is apparent through Oscar’s concerns that he deeply disapproves of the hypermasculinity that serves as a source of disagreement and conflict throughout most of the novel. This same hypermasculinity is a major factor in the female protagonists’ subservience; they are inexorably trapped in the misogyny foisted at birth on the Dominican men (and on them also). This “natural order” is hardwired in the women’s psyche; for men to have such absolute power over them, these women must believe that this power is real and that they are inferior to men.

Even after being transplanted to the United States, Dominicans perpetuate this mindset that continues to keep the women subservient and to complicate their existence. In this diaspora, however, hypermasculinity becomes only one factor causing hardship for the Dominican expatriates; it seems that the central irritant becomes race and the loss of a sense of self-worth that occurs when one is beaten down by racism.

Beli, for example, by the simple fact of her birth, lays bare her country’s (the Dominican Republic’s) widely-known and shameful “secret,” its bold denial of African origins, even among families that can barely be considered white. She is fundamentally an unfortunate by-product of

Dominican bigotry and racism against its dark-complexioned inhabitants. Pujols, who embodies the sense of entitlement and prerogative of the Trujillo era and white privilege, is Beli’s love interest, hunting him down “with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who” (p. 85).

During her school years, Beli is a social outcast, along with “the Boy in the Iron Lung, the idiot, and the Chinese girl [named Wei]” (p. 76), but even Wei mocks Beli’s dark skin: “You black, she said, fingering Beli’s thin forearm. *Black-black*” (p. 77). Beli resents her own dark skin and outsider status (an outlook she unintentionally passes on to her son, Oscar), preventing her from achieving what she wants. Eventually, puberty works its magic and transforms Beli, who becomes the center of attention anywhere she goes; when she is unwittingly made aware of the implicit and explicit influence of her sensuality, she becomes involved with men.

Baní, the city where Beli lived during her adolescence, is recalled by Yunior as being “famed for its resistance to blackness, and it was here, alas, that the darkest character in our story resided” (p. 71). In Díaz’ work, it is likely that the blacker the skin of a character, the more trials he or she will undergo, either through social pressures or self-inflicted via some kind of learned powerlessness that develops into self-hatred—not unlike an oft-beaten dog, walking with head down and tail between its legs.

Furthermore, Díaz’ setting descriptions, as well as his deliberate depiction of Beli as she is being thrashed, conjure up a destructive history in which blackness represents utter wretchedness. “They beat her like she was a slave” (p. 126), he writes in a straightforward but powerful manner. They beat her “like she was a dog” (p. 126). It is almost as if Díaz leaves out details about the beating itself to emphasize the pain that Beli feels all over her broken body after the perpetrators leave her for dead.

Certainly, Díaz’ novel captures the subtlest nuances of what it meant for the Dominican community to live under the Trujillo dictatorship. It was a point in time when a mere word of dissent could mean persecution and even death, when discrimination and oppression were the order of the day both for opponents of the regime and residents who had no revolutionary involvement. By dint of the harshness of his rule, the consequences migrants faced on foreign soil are the same conflicts they had on the island of Hispaniola (Hoffnung-Garskof, 2004).

All the more so since Díaz’ approach to women during the Trujillo era plays a major role in the novel: Their bodies are the nexus through which he articulates the history of fukú, Yuniór’s narrative, and the sovereign power of the aforesaid dictator. The female protagonists of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Lola and Beli, try every now and again to escape the boundaries and social conditionings of a regime that forces them into submission, where their bodies are nothing but sex objects for men.

Fukú (and how it is perceived), not only as a curse but also as a formative part of every Dominican family, explains why Oscar’s fate is the same as Abelard and Socorro’s (death) and Beli’s (distressing youth and exile). Fukú is therefore memory and history, a driving force behind why Oscar is what he is. It is the central element of the supernatural inventory in the novel through which the reader gets to experience the lives of Oscar’s ancestry in the Dominican Republic, and it is because of it that one can sneak up on the ensuing story of exile in his family.

In this way, fukú is connected with the past as well as with three fundamental features: its colonial character beginning with the Spanish Conquest of the Americas, slavery, and its causality in Oscar’s tragic destiny and that of the women in the novel. Given that Santo Domingo was the doorway to the upsurge of the slave trade of Africans in the Americas, Yuniór feels justified in claiming that “Santo Domingo might be fukú’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but

we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (p. 11). The conclusion that the reader may come to is that fukú’s *raison d’être* is in some manner associated with the passing of the African heritage to a remote and inhospitable environment, and for Díaz, all settlers of Kilometer Zero—Santo Domingo and all of Hispaniola (Dominicans and Haitians)—come under the sway of fukú’s birr.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, there are also privileged spaces that refer to the tangible dimension of pain and incorporeal spaces that allude to painful memories. Spaces where there is often harassment (“The guards then proceeded to inform the other prisoners that Abelard was a homosexual and a Communist—That is *untrue!* Abelard protested—but who is going to listen to a gay comunista?” [p. 195]), torture (“Among the prisoners of the Trujillato few tortures were more feared . . . Abelard survived it but was never the same. Turned him into a vegetable. The proud flame of his intellect extinguished” [p. 204]), impunity (“Joaquin Balaguer . . . famously [ordered] the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed . . . (Can you say *impunity?*)” [p. 307]), assassination plots (“At Trujillo’s behest Abbes organized the plot to assassinate the democratically elected president of Venezuela: Rómulo Betancourt!” [p. 277]), and murder (“The Mirabal Sisters were the Great Martyrs of that period. Patria Mercedes, Minerva Argentina, and Antonia Maria—three beautiful sisters from Salcedo who resisted Trujillo and were murdered for it” [p. 305]) committed by the fukú of dictatorship. Undoubtedly, these are represented, inside and outside the island of Hispaniola, as spaces where characters and real-life figures have been subjected to emotional suffering, emasculation, submission, and forced disappearance.

Interestingly, although Yunior is not related by blood to the Cabral-de León family, he suffers the hardships of fukú in the way of heartache (“I heard from my mother that Lola had met someone in Miami, which was where she had moved, that she was pregnant and was getting married. I called her. What the fuck, Lola—But she hung up” [p. 260]) and nightmares (“Took ten years to the day . . . until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn’t give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke . . . and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win” [p. 261]). Additionally, when Oscar shows him a blank book in a (bad) dream, he decides to tell the history of Oscar’s genealogy teeming with violence, the misfortunes of different generations and how tough it was for them to put up with the dictatorship, as a personal zafa counterspell, but at the same time he notes a world brimming with love in the process. He narrates,

And yet there are other days, when I’m downtrodden or morose, when I find myself at my desk late at night, unable to sleep, flipping through (of all things) Oscar’s dog-eared copy of *Watchmen*. One of the few things that he took with him on the Final Voyage that we recovered. The original trade. I flip through the book, one of his top three, without question, to the last horrifying chapter: “A Stronger Loving World.” (p. 264)

On his road to redemption after Oscar’s death, Yunior gets into the habit of writing and feels the urge to write all the time, an activity previously carried out by Oscar. Thereby, he ends up following in his footsteps. The memory exercise that the characters do through Yunior’s novel, since there is a chapter and subchapters conveying Lola’s (“Chapter 2: Wildwood 1982-1985” [pp. 50–70]), La Inca’s (“La Inca Speaks” [p. 235]), and Ybon’s (“Ybón, As Recorded by Oscar” [p. 235]) voices, is a search for consciousness and restitution; it is the zafa counterspell to be released from the cursed yesteryears. In this respect, it should be noted that when such

characters gaze at their pasts, they are constructing memory so that they do not fade into oblivion all the while building a bridge between identity and history.

Hence, it is manifest that through the rescue of memory it is possible to combat the curse of an entire genealogy, which has lingered on several generations. In this manner, the importance of recording history is key to understanding both the past and the present more thoroughly, since they are particularly important for what they imply about the future. Díaz’ novel thus enters into dialogue with history, allowing the reader to explore, gain insights, and broaden his or her outlook on the Americas, especially the Dominican Republic. Yunió (or Díaz) does the memory exercise as a quest for knowledge partly by the agency of literature and *zafa*, the counterspell for the redemption of Caribbean culture.

Moreover, it is a culture that fosters a strong reaction against the preponderance of blackness that supposedly endangered the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century, most particularly in the form of Afro-Haitian immigration. This inrush of Afro-Haitians meant the dissolution of the nationwide dream of whitening—a dream that, given the unmistakable mulatto complexion of the general populace and the country’s failure to appeal to European immigrants, was already destined to fail.

The upshot of the efforts of skin whitening were, truth be told, a carnage upon Haitian and Haitian-descended people inhabiting the Dominican Republic in the late 1930s, as “then dictator Rafael Trujillo oversaw the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Haitians” (Machado, 2015). It was a turning point that has inserted itself into several 2000s novels, such as Julia Álvarez’ (2004) *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Mario Vargas Llosa’s (2001) *The Feast of the Goat*, notwithstanding the eight decades that have passed since.

In essence, Díaz paints the whole novel with pointed references to the history of the Dominican Republic, conveying that it is this history that still fuels the “white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate” (p. 213) that envelop Yunior, Lola, and Oscar. The outcome is that the two ruthless dictators (Trujillo and Balaguer) depicted in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gleefully take pleasure in silencing writers while smoothly advancing their own negrophobic agendas. For example, the characters’ bodies, which are so scorned due to their darkness, their bulkiness, their foreignness, or their femininity, are in Yunior’s reverential indulgence transmuted and sung into a sacrosanct and pivotal position in the novel.

The racial prejudice in the Dominican Republic has its beginnings in the slavery of Africans who arrived on the island of Hispaniola with the foundation of Santo Domingo and French Haiti. Africans were uprooted from their continent to a completely different environment within the Americas. From this historical point of the colonization of the New World and the violence against slaves, fukú was born; it is the curse of continuous cultural deracination. It is the bane of Dominicans who have seen themselves forced to create a syncretic identity, attempting to blend their different cultural roots (from different continents), differences that were made all the more apparent in their flight to the United States after the collapse of the Trujillo dictatorship.

In the fall of 1937, Haitians residing in the Dominican Republic suffered a second important wave of racism when Haitians on the border began to have access to more jobs, and therefore more presence in the area than the Dominicans themselves. For this reason, and probably because of their more apparent African traits, as alluded to in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Haitians were expelled from the Dominican Republic over economic fears (Rutgers, n.d.). This perception is aptly illustrated when Oscar’s mother refers in strong terms to

Haitians and their “evils.” Racism also exists in the United States but fueled by different dynamics, not in the least related to the Haitian problem as exposed in the novel.

The truth is that both in the 1930s and contemporary Haitian immigration, much of the attention against them is fostered in the concerns of neighboring communities over their religions that mix African, Caribbean, and Christian cultures together. This syncretism is very common in the Caribbean, such as the Cuban Santería, but the Haitian variation of voodoo seems to be particularly disturbing to its neighbors because they perceive it as an ungodly practice that foments evil (Fieser, 2013). This also created an antagonism in conjunction with the racism against Blacks, still pervasive since the colonization of the Americas, especially against the visibly more African—that is, the majority of Haitians.

There is no doubt that this fear of Haitian culture infiltrated Dominican society (Davis, 2012). Allowing the people who were the first on the continent to become independent through a slave rebellion certainly caused fear in a society whose structure still had insular, creole leadership, a fear that permeated every stratum of the racial hierarchy, from the Spaniards to the mestizos and Blacks of the island.

Concerns about voodoo, along with the ideals of beauty imposed in the Dominican Republic, created a rather racist cultural climate affecting Blacks and those of mixed African roots. This ended up being quite negative for the islanders’ self-esteem, which was especially exacerbated in those who later departed to the United States. Lola with her boyfriends, her mother’s strength like a rampart hiding her physical weakness, and the various women in Oscar’s life with whom he falls in love throughout his youth are all testimony to this lack of self-esteem. Several of these relationships end up degrading the women’s self-esteem and manipulating them as sex objects.

These contradictions were not only imposed by the European settlers at the time of the Spanish conquest and their stratification of society around race and Spanish dominance but also during the era of US imperialism that created an even more difficult environment for Blacks. This concern is strongly demonstrated when Oscar visits the Dominican Republic and Yunion says, “so dark, he noticed, and his mother said, dismissively, Maldito [*sic*] haitianos” (p. 221). Here one can see how the Haitian culture and those residing abroad are seen as a curse, the same fukú curse that permeates everything and migrates to different areas, following people wherever they go.

These problems stand out even more when Oscar’s family is on vacation in the Dominican Republic, being seen as both outsiders and traitors. For the women of his family, the concerns are expressed in aesthetic terms as the blackness of their origin, plainly visible on their faces and the color of their skin, is rejected and abhorred not only in the Dominican Republic but also in the United States, where there remains a desperate clutching at racial power ever since the time of slavery and the Civil War.

Díaz is stressing to his readers the harm done to immigrant families through gender bias, and how it not only ends up frustrating the lives of the women themselves but also those of the men they love due to the impossibility of living a full and open life with them, in equality and trust. Oscar never finds himself in a romantic situation where the woman he is interested in is free of insecurities, and these are the concerns that Díaz does not want his audience to miss. He wants to impress upon his readers the disruptive damage that gender bias does to whole communities already stigmatized as immigrants and ethnic minorities, who continue to believe that hypermasculinity is an ideal that must be pursued regardless of the suffering it brings to the spirit of both the men and women.

Yunior does not recount stories about other characters unless they are men he feels a strong kinship with or women he feels attracted to or with whom he craves a sexual relationship. Yunior, for example, despite his tendency to womanize (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 287), is deeply infatuated with Oscar’s sister, Lola, and narrates the events that lead to Oscar’s untimely demise in large part because of her.

Oscar, who is the most shadowy character in the novel, a pariah even among his Dominican peers, is overall portrayed as un-Dominican based on four traits: sex appeal, complexion, lineage, and culture. As a geeky, obese, and young Afro-Dominican man, he is well versed in the literary fiction genre but totally inept at social skills and the game of sex.

In effect, Oscar’s physique and way of life depart greatly from the stereotypical Dominican male image. He fails to conform to the norm by being at odds with the social mores and the traditional cultural expectations of his peers. Moreover, the novel starts off with negativity, focusing on everything that Oscar is not, the author overdoing this technique of emphasizing differences throughout. Oscar’s un-Dominican features serve as the novel’s pretext to question the standards, norms, and power structures that prescribe marginalization and oppression.

Ultimately, by being Latino, Black, effeminate, overweight, needy, and nerdy, Oscar is utterly marginalized, as suggested by Sepulveda (2013, pp. 20–21). Marginalized by society’s mores and rejected by his so-called friends, Oscar suffers bullying and neglect throughout his ephemeral life; yet, in sharp contrast with this social isolation, Oscar is the novel’s title character and his lifetime frames the whole story.

Unlike Díaz, Oscar was born in the United States. However, his family mirrors Díaz’ since it maintains its roots with relatives living in the Dominican Republic as well as with the

Dominican diaspora community in New Jersey. Even though much of the novel’s plot revolves around the differences between the Dominican Republic and the United States in relation to history, values, and economy, Oscar is not in truth given an opportunity to extricate himself from such countries’ mores as he *de facto* finds himself cast out of both.

At Don Bosco Tech, he is bullied by “white kids [who] looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness” (p. 48). Oscar then considers studying at an all-boys Catholic high school in Paterson “a source of endless anguish” (p. 24) because he has none of the stereotypical traits of male Dominicans such as hypermasculinity with regard to sex appeal, sports, and body build, and is unfit to attain these qualities. The streetwise narrator, Yuniór, pretentiously deems himself to have such traits, pointing out Oscar’s shortcomings disapprovingly, a position that Al and Miggs, Oscar’s friends, seemingly share:

Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn’t have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his “anti-pussy devices,” Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them—sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded. (pp. 24–25)

His moniker, Oscar Wao, is Melvis’ (or Yuniór’s boy’s) mishearing when Yuniór says Oscar “looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (p. 150), an assessment of Oscar’s bookishness and his apparent queerness. Furthermore, racial discrimination plays a major role here as light skin takes precedence over blackness in Dominican society, especially in contrast to the dark-

complexioned Haitians (Robles, 2007); Oscar is Black and hence labeled “Haitian” (“Great, his tío said, looking askance at his complexion, now you look Haitian” [p. 34]), just like Beli (“Watch out, Mom, Lola said, they probably think you’re Haitian. La única haitiana aquí eres tú, mi amor, she retorted” [p. 224])—yet another way Oscar and company, as happens in real life with Afro-Dominicans, are treated with contempt.

Nonetheless, Oscar is unable to make a step in any direction and therefore cannot fit into the mold and much less adapt himself to the norm of any of his cultures, since he is at a crossroads between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Notwithstanding, Oscar elicits the language of slavery in the Americas in pining for his “manumission, when he would at last be set free from its unending horror” (p. 24) of high school. He unexpectedly becomes a teacher of English and history at this same high school after receiving his degree at Rutgers, only to have his social exclusion steadily worsened by the new cohort of disparaging students:

And if he’d thought Don Bosco had been the moronic inferno when he was young—try now that he was older and teaching English and history. Jesús Santa María. A nightmare. He wasn’t great at teaching. His heart wasn’t in it, and boys of all grades and dispositions shitted on him effusively. (pp. 213–214)

The novel firmly entrenches the convoluted history of the Dominican Republic in Oscar’s tale of woe, in which the initially anonymous narrator details the cast of characters reckoning with their current misfortunes as the outcome of the culturally bequeathed fukú curse. With a double entendre, Yuniór views Oscar’s status as “being fukú’d” (p. 219), in Oscar’s extreme case “being fukú’d, being beyond misery” (p. 219). Oscar likewise makes this pun after having been crushed by the capitán’s henchmen, who batter the troublesome and daring youth for hanging

around with their boss’ girlfriend, Ybon, a Caribbean prostitute: “Fukú. He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. Fuck you” (p. 246).

In essence, Oscar uses his fictive mainstay to pursue his frenzied efforts to find love no matter what. In another translingual but lethal play on words with an f-word not long before his ludicrously self-sought death at the hands of the capitán’s henchmen, Oscar displays his callowness:

They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we’ll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English.

Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself. [At this point, the henchmen shoot their weapons, murdering the ill-fated young man.] (p. 258)

Interestingly, Yuniór comes up with the title of the novel while drawing inspiration from Ernest Hemingway’s (1998) short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” which is about a man whose renaissance from cowardice to bravery results in his demise. One could directly relate this to Díaz’ title character, Oscar, who dies after “he summoned all the courage he ever had” (p. 249) to return to the Dominican Republic, track Ybon, and find intense, albeit short-lived, love through her. It is tragically ironic, of course, as Oscar’s infatuation with Ybon eventually gets him killed, but such is Díaz’ commentary on life: The best experiences one has are not only the sweetest but also the most evanescent.

In effect, Oscar’s death from naïvely uttering the word *fuego* (Spanish for fire) (p. 258) mirrors Macomber’s “sudden white-hot, blinding flash [exploding] inside his head” (Hemingway, 1998, p. 27). Toward the end of the novel, Yuniór muses over his own storytelling, informing the reader that “It’s almost done. Almost over. Only some final things to show you

before your Watcher fulfills his cosmic duty” (p. 263); as if it were Yunior’s responsibility to educate the reader about the death of Oscar, who is now at the center of his family: “All we ever talk about is Oscar” (p. 262).

Several plot devices hint at Yunior’s self-awareness as the narrator of the story. One is the simple fact he admits to having revised (whether one or multiple times) the draft of the novel. In one footnote, for instance, he openly states he opted to keep erroneous data in the first draft for the good of the narrative:

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (p. 280)

In the same footnote, Yunior not only inadvertently acknowledges having written more than one draft of the novel but also asserts having changed information after receiving feedback from Leonie, a presumed expert on the Dominican Republic. The revision(s) he has made again raise the question of what is factual and what is fabrication in Oscar’s tale of woe.

Oscar and Yunior exhibit prowess in different areas, with the former flaunting his science-fiction and fantasy erudition and the latter his street-smart shrewdness. It is Yunior, though, who learns to esteem Oscar’s otherness while Oscar keeps trying to cope with the hypermasculinity and sex drive expected of a stereotypical Dominican male.

In this incessant turmoil that Díaz serves up, the men are the main culprits. The constant striving to present themselves as males in a hypermasculine community like the one that

surrounds Oscar ends up destroying amorous relationships and, ultimately, masculinity itself. It creates a demeanor that is not conducive to healthy relationships, but rather sustains a fukú among the population that believes they must continue to follow the same extreme gender roles for the community to go on.

In point of fact, fukú is so deeply ingrained in the Dominican culture that everyone apparently “has a fukú story knocking around in their family” (p. 13). The fukú curse is, without doubt, a compelling and versatile literary device throughout the novel, primarily as Yuniór’s trope to recount Oscar’s family history as it forms part of the folklore of the Dominican Republic.

By the same token, fukú’s supernatural traits nurture the book’s intertextuality, especially Díaz’ reliance on comic, fantasy, and sci-fi literature as inherent decoders; i.e., instruments to draw on and take in the grim, uncanny, and disheartening reality of the Trujillo dictatorship and its heinous human rights abuses, including its posthumous legacy, a foreseeable consequence of a history of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial rampage. Essentially, the fukú curse allows for locating the plot in different lands, considering its colonial and African origin, its impact during Trujillo’s rule, its influence on the Dominican diaspora and the many vicissitudes it brought about in their lives. As reported by Yuniór himself, “There are a zillion of these fukú stories” (p. 14).

The novel explores the nexus between hypermasculinity, colonialism, and fukú as embodied by Trujillo’s tyranny, his regime’s violation of human rights, and the machismo, savagery, and debauchery of the *caudillo*. Thereby, the narrative expounds the abiding effects, sociopolitical implications and arbitrary repercussions of the Trujillo dictatorship on the

Dominican gender dynamics, which are highly relevant to the general configuration of the Dominican Republic even today.

For instance, hypermasculine tendencies, practices, and ideologies are not inexorably linked to men and women’s economic (in)dependence or solvency, as seen in Oscar’s mother, who is financially able to immigrate to the United States and much later on foists hypermasculine beliefs on him. They also are not necessarily objected to by second-generation immigrants like Yunior, who personifies the philandering (“I wasn’t around for most of this nonsense; I was out chasing the pussy and delivering pool tables and out with the boys on the weekends” [p. 154]), unfaithfulness (“Suriyan showed up at my door. Looking more beautiful than I ever saw her. I want us to try again. Of course I said yes, and went out and put a cuerno in her that very night” [p. 162]), conceit (“Dios mío! Some niggers couldn’t have gotten ass on Judgment Day; me I couldn’t not get ass, even when I tried” [p. 162]) and emotional detachment (“for about a year I scromfed strange girls and alternated between Fuck Lola” [p. 259]) associated with the hypermasculine Dominican image. Both, Yunior and Beli attempt to impart the “good ol’” principles of Dominican manliness to Oscar, who initially appeared to be the “quintessential” Dominican child:

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. Because in those days he was (still) a “normal” Dominican boy raised in a “typical” Dominican family. (p. 18)

Nevertheless, as soon as Oscar’s “first and only ménage à trois” (p. 19) with Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco ends, and he whimpers about it in front of both his mother and sister,

his chances of becoming an *üermacho* diminish and doom him to dorkiness: “I might be a dork but I’m a resourceful dork” (p. 64). Deploring Oscar’s un-Dominican nerdy ways, Beli commands him to “Go outside and play! *Pórtate como un muchacho normal*” (p. 303). Later, she growls,

Pa’ ‘fuera! . . . And out he would go, like a boy condemned, to spend a few hours being tormented by the other boys—Please, I want to stay, he would beg his mother, but she shoved him out—You ain’t a woman to be staying in the house . . . Eventually, his mother rooting him out again: What in *carajo* is the matter with you? (p. 304)

Oscar’s dearth of masculine Dominican markers and *outré* interests are thus unforgivingly associated with the queer microcosm of the LGBTIQ community, which is the *raison* why Oscar earned the moniker “Wao.” Upset by Oscar’s lack of manly features, Yuniór faces the challenge of training him to make them surface. Project Oscar, as dubbed by Yuniór, is then the initiative he takes to knock him into shape through physical exercise, particularly running, so that Oscar’s sex appeal increases over time and he does not go against “the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (p. 146).

In essence, Yuniór urges Oscar to lose weight, run four days a week, toss his geekiness aside, and get a girlfriend or lover to bring his manful Dominican-ness to fruition. Consequently, in the novel, having an active sex life becomes synonymous with Dominican manhood to the point that Oscar hears “from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin” (p. 145). The novel also associates the dread of suffering from not having sex, or “no-toto-itis” as Yuniór calls it (p. 145), with failure to comply with Trujillo’s hypermasculine standards, “a consummate *culocrat* to the end” (p. 282).

In effect, Trujillo’s insatiable carnal desire for females socially validated sexual coercion and violence against women and girls, as seen in Beli’s relationship with the Gangster, “an old chulo preying on Beli’s naïveté” (p. 109) and Abelard’s demise for insulating his daughter, Jacquelyn, from “getting raped by her Illustrious President” (p. 178). Similarly, Oscar’s uncle, tío Rudolfo, precipitously advises Oscar to “to grab a muchacha, y metéselo. That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y metéselo!” (p. 27).

Hence, the connection between gender-based violence, machismo, autocracy, and patriarchy is glaring, casting light on how these very same elements are not only reinforced and shaped to the detriment of women and their rights but also to the decimation of men’s emotional dimension and feelings in the process. Yuniór’s disregard for building meaningful, caring, and amiable relationships with both women and men prevent him from developing and maturing as a character; he himself confesses, “A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things” (p. 155).

Afterward, Yuniór faces the consequences of his licentious behavior, which result in a sentimental void, unyielding loneliness, “and these incredibly narcissitic [*sic*] hopes of reconciliation that [he] did nothing to achieve” (p. 259). Lola, “of all the chicks [he’d] run up on at Rutgers, of all the chicks [he’d] run up on ever, the one [he’d] never gotten a handle on” (p. 164), finishes with him after she realizes he has cheated on her: “You should never have had carnal relations with that Paraguayan girl . . . I know, I said, I know” (p. 252).

What is worse, Yuniór says while engaging in conversation with Oscar that he does not know why he betrayed Lola with another woman: “If I knew that, it wouldn’t be a problem” (p. 252), the whole situation leading to Lola aborting his baby (p. 218). Díaz’ novel, as a result, evinces how women are the main victims in a society denuded of affection, gender equality,

commitment, engagement, sensibility, and love due to the transnational hypermasculine values it upholds.

To further illustrate this point, when Díaz writes that Oscar has become friendly with a woman through his work as a teacher, Yunion explains Oscar’s masculine insecurities by saying, “He tried calling a couple of times, but her paranoid boyfriend seemed to live with the phone welded to his head, never seemed to give her any of his messages” (p. 215). It can be perceived here that the boyfriend’s paranoia, fueled by his own insecurities, results in emotionally wounding the woman and subduing her under the weight of a domineering male.

The reality is that this is a perennial problem because it has never been condemned at a societal level and people are not critical of it. Any comportment that is not challenged by a community of peers is deemed to be implicitly permitted, even desirable. However, Díaz humorously attacks the situation with the phrase “the phone welded to his head” (p. 215), presenting a satirical image of the society surrounding Oscar in an attempt to jettison respect for these social codes that Díaz sees as fundamentally harmful for the youth.

Díaz writes, “but some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change” (p. 213), drawing attention to the need to eradicate the self-hatred people feel when seeing themselves trapped in a setting that transposes their identities and eats away at their self-esteem day by day. They must seek to identify with the ideals of beauty of people just like them. An apple seeking to look like an orange is doomed to failure and will have its aspirations and soul crushed by its own unrealistic expectations. Being the best in the world at whatever endeavor is not attainable by all. Most have to settle for being the best that they can be at whatever is important to them, and that should be enough to earn the respect and acceptance of others.

Although Oscar’s story also purports to be a critique of access to education in the United States, the truth of the matter is that, for the most part, Dominican immigrants are literate, some even having attained a high level of education (Reynoso, 2003, p. 61). A flagrant example of this is the educational opportunities that Lola enjoys, and that she ends up wasting, in the Dominican Republic when she returns to live with La Inca. Oscar in his literary loneliness and, in parallel, Díaz in his professional life as a writer present strong commentaries by intellectuals frustrated by a community and an environment that squanders the educational opportunities provided by the United States. This is a reality that the middle class enjoyed in the Dominican Republic as well (Classbase, n.d.).

Immigrant Dominicans left the island at the peak of their professional lives, creating a void, a brain drain in their communities of origin (Özden, 2006, pp. 5–17). The resulting shortage of professionals created an urgent need for their return, putting them in an ideal bargaining position whenever they felt like coming back. Díaz explains this when he writes, “Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can” (p. 220). This phenomenon is perhaps even more pronounced now, since there is no political regime like that of Trujillo that persecuted these populations. This is a chosen eviction, just like the educational eviction in the United States, in the face of the opportunities offered by its public education system.

Díaz also describes the power that dictatorships have, as could be seen during the time of Trujillo when he quashed all opposition, even burning books that were against him. One cannot help but note at this point the power of writing, the literate speech siding with the sword in a joint effort to bring the truth to light. That speech is seen in the image of the notorious Don Juan, Porfirio Rubirosa, whom Yunió compares to Oscar in his childhood: “You should have seen

him, his mother sighed in her Last Days. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa” (p. 18), later on failing to see how the flirtatious and captivating Oscar is coerced and perverted by the usual speech and “traditional definitions of Caribbean masculinity” (Weese, 2014, p. 90).

When he, as a person, no longer extols these values, his entourage ostracizes him because he is no longer identified as truly male; this ends up sparking his self-doubt and causes him to become insecure. It has less to do with his obesity or general physical appearance, but rather with the expectations of the community and how they constrain him to a specific role as an individual.

Oscar is rejected because he does not accept hypermasculinity and racism as guiding principles that should determine the lives of people. For him, these cultural expectations are a full-fledged fukú. Oscar surmises that it is not fukú to have been born with black skin or a dark complexion and nappy hair; rather, the real fukú is to hate oneself (i.e., “people-of-color self-hate” [p. 213]) for being different, for not following social ideals, and for not fulfilling others’ expectations. This is the fukú curse that may result (in Díaz’ and Oscar’s shared view) in the killing of immigrant communities, especially Dominicans, who have managed to excel despite their so-called social inferiority.

On a side note, Oscar is not one to openly strive to perpetuate the hypermasculine image imposed upon him by society, nor Díaz expect his readers to do so after reading the dire consequences expressed in his novel. In this respect, Yunion writes, “If he’d been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo. It 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” (p. 20).

He stresses that it is not necessarily a decision not to follow the social ideal. Instead, there are people who oppose it by nature and who are doomed to be shunned by a society stuck in a

perpetual rut of contempt, a Darwinist theory no less, but worse still because it has the ability to implant itself in every culture.

By explaining that he never had a paternal figure to learn from, Yuniór implies that Oscar is not able to mimic his father’s macho traits, but rather has to learn them socially in his family. Hypermasculinity and racism, in Díaz’ eyes, are not so much natural-born traits of people but are learned by social pressures. He therefore seeks to undermine such behaviors with his novel.

In relation to the origins of Antillean curse, rather than using the original spelling, Díaz writes *fukú* (American spelling) in lieu of *fucú* (Latin American spelling). According to the Editorial Board of *El Tiempo* (1994), a Colombian newspaper, “*fucú*” means “bad luck.” Bogotálogo, a dictionary of Bogotá slang, also defines the word and says it is “a trigger for bad luck” (Fucú, 2011, p. 102). On the same page of this dictionary, “*fucosear*,” a word similar in both meaning and spelling is listed, and it reads as if it were the verb form of *fucú*: “to taint an ongoing endeavor with bad luck” (Fucosear, 2011, p. 102).

What is clear is that the concept and usage of *fucú* are not exclusively Dominican because, based on my research, it is employed in Colombia too. In the book *Peasants and Religion: A Socioeconomic Study of Dios Olivario and the Palma Sola Movement in the Dominican Republic*, the authors, Mats Lundahl and Jan Lundius (2002), claim that *fucú* “is probably derived from *fufu*, a word from the Ewe-speaking peoples in West Africa, [which] came to mean ‘witchcraft’, ‘being bewitched’ or simply ‘bad luck’ [in the Americas]” (p. 373).

Since *fucú* had its origin in Africa, it is no wonder that it is used not only in Colombia but also in the Dominican Republic, countries with a history of black slavery. Nonetheless, like so many different facets of our culture stemming from Africa, *fucú* has not been subject of much

academic debate as yet. Díaz has done a commendable job in taking to it as a literary device as it was nowhere to be found in Dominican letters.

In Colombia, Carlos Arturo Truque (2004) is the only writer, as far as is known, who resorted to fucú as the foundation of “Fucú,” one of his short stories. Russian poet Evgueni Evtushenko (1988), for his part, used it as metaphor for Christopher Columbus’ remains in a book-length poem entitled *Фукы!* which translates as *Fukú!* in Spanish. In the introduction, it is stated that the poem serves as a bequest to the Dominican Republic because Evtushenko was used to writing something about each nation he visited, in the form of an article, book, or poem. Díaz was aware of this piece before writing his novel. He said in an interview, “I’ve read it; it’s pretty damn good” (*BOMB*, 2014, p. 101), but it is unknown whether it was an influence on his novel.

Columbus’ relationship to fucú is so transparent that American journalist and author, Tony Horwitz (2009), refers to it as “El fucu de Colón . . . That means curse or jinx” (p. 79). On the same page of his book *A Voyage Long and Strange: Rediscovering the New World*, he further asserts that “Most Dominicans believed Columbus brought bad luck. Even mentioning his name risked misfortune.” What is more, “Few businesses were named for the navigator, and the ones that were had gone bust.” In Díaz’ words, the relationship between Columbus and fukú or, better yet, Columbus’ fukú is of paramount importance to understand real-life events, such as the Kennedy curse and the North Vietnamese victory in the Vietnam War:

You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission’s question, Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God’s Honest Truth: It wasn’t the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe. It wasn’t aliens or the KGB or a lone gunman . . . ; it was the fukú. Where in coñazo do you think the so-called

Curse of the Kennedys comes from? How about Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam? I mean, Negro, *please*. (p. 12)

Like Carpentier’s theory of *lo real maravilloso*, fukú does not oppose history but plays a crucial role in making sense of it. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, both history and the supernatural are meshed to provide the basis for the plot or, at least, as Yunior puts it, “In Santo Domingo a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow” (p. 200). In this way, fukú is not just a fanciful device one reads about; rather, it is something that has its foundation in reality and has had an impact on people’s lives as well.

Yunior’s voice, which is heard throughout the novel, is that of the author himself. This character’s impossibly omniscient narration reads as if it were an entity whose existence goes beyond the pages of the novel to identify the historical roots of the plot as stemming from fantasy and science fiction. Because of this, the Admiral’s settlement on the island of Hispaniola and Trujillo’s and Balaguer’s dictatorships become a chain of events that can seemingly be understood through the supernatural traits of the colonial curse, fukú; all the more so since Yunior acknowledges that the novel itself is another fukú story:

As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, I have a fukú story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. Mine ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful.

It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat. (p. 14)

The reader is then presented with a text that claims to be another example of the power of fukú. As in Carpentier’s prologue to *The Kingdom of this World*, it recounts a succession of extraordinary events, which occurred in Santo Domingo in a specific period that does not cover

the span of a lifetime, allowing the marvelous to flow freely from a reality that has been followed in every detail (Carpentier, 1993, p. 16).

However, Yunior rhetorically asks, “What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (p. 14) and, by doing so, echoes the final words of Carpentier’s (1993) prologue: “But what is the entire history of [Latin] America if not a chronicle of *lo real maravilloso*?” (p. 17). As suggested by the Cuban writer himself, fantasy, science fiction, and the supernatural become real, as happens in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: “But the fukú ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” (p. 11), which further consolidates a kind of verisimilitude centered around the fukú curse.

Moreover, Jack Kirby and J. R. R. Tolkien’s work provide both Yunior and Oscar a means not of breaking away from their world, but rather of grasping it fully and claiming it as their own. In other words, Kirby and Tolkien’s fantasy fiction supply a contextual point of reference to the “stranger than fiction” characters of Dominican history.

For Yunior, for instance, the villain with whom he is familiar—Trujillo, specifically—can only be compared to the most egregious antagonists of fantasy fiction, e.g, Sauron, Arawn, and Darkseid (p. 270). As a result, Díaz’ recap of the *Trujillato*’s historical context through footnotes evinces how he combines historical and fantastic elements, all of which reveal how both fit comfortably within the same space.

What is more, the novel opens with the following epigraph: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives... to Galactus??” (p. 9), which can be read as both a reference to a question asked by possibly the most powerful villain in the Marvel Universe (Lee, 2014) and as a means of invoking the ruthlessness of Trujillo’s rule. In *The Fantastic Four*, Galactus is Uatu’s sworn

enemy, the latter of whom is the character Yuniór feels most identified with, as he calls himself The Watcher multiple times over the course of the novel. Yuniór, in essence, is the one who literally watches over Oscar and everyone else in his ephemeral life. It is then arguable that fantasy fiction serves as a metaphor for his role in the narrative as well.

As far as fukú and, more broadly, the supernatural go, they focus on Trujillo, as Yuniór states, “fukú had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master” (p. 11). It can thus be said that the central figure around whom fukú revolves is Trujillo who, unlike the other characters in the novel, has the power to unleash fukú on those who oppose or contradict him.

Unlike Macandal, who is admired for his qualities in Carpentier’s magnum opus *The Kingdom of this World*, Trujillo is a detestable villain who embodies a displeasing aesthetic, that of fukú. Despite the humor and nonchalance with which Yuniór treats him, his incontrovertible knowledge of history imposes itself on the narrative and conditions Trujillo’s portrayal.

For this very reason, Trujillo is not depicted in a positive light, but rather in ironic, impudent, and disdainful tones that become synonymous with El Jefe throughout the novel. This is more noticeable when he is described as a “portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery” (p. 270).

Whereas Carpentier proposed *lo real maravilloso* as the key to understanding Latin American history, Díaz offered a variant of that kind of heightened reality where elements of the supernatural (e.g., the Golden Mongoose and the Man Without a Face) posit a metaphor for Caribbean history. However, Yuniór presents Díaz’ variant with skepticism. In the prologue, he mostly speaks of fukú while admitting that for some it is a mere superstition and validating it,

“It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (p. 13).

The audacity of his language, his unconventional account of yesteryears, the irony with which he treats historical figures, as well as his usage of Spanish (whether foul words or sexual terms), provide comic relief in the midst of the harrowing events the novel retells. From that irreverent outlook, the reader who is unfamiliar with Dominican history can truly fathom why Trujillo is referred to as a “pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin” (p. 270), whereas his first son is “Lil’ Fuckface, as he is affectionately known” (p. 276).

Thematically, the novel touches on the fantastic with the viciousness of the Trujillo era and the Dominican diasporic experience while the Hispaniola serves as a magical setting where the supernatural flourishes. The main purpose of these supernatural elements is that they help assuage the crimes committed and the perversities carried out under the Trujillo dictatorship. The canefields, the Man Without a Face, and the forebodings are the fukú curse at its worst, whereas La Inca’s herculean praying power and the Golden Mongoose are the zafa counterspell at its best, the latter of which eases the assimilation of some of the most gruesome occurrences in the novel.

In addition, at times when the characters find themselves in the thick of the plot, the sudden burst of the supernatural functions as a palliative that allays the bleakest details of the Cabral-de León familial tragedies. Furthermore, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can be considered a Bildungsroman novel (O’Rourke, 2007) or a coming-of-age story in that it focuses on the psychological and emotional growth of the protagonist, Oscar, from childhood to adulthood and whose short life serves as a vehicle for the account of his family’s fukú; the jinx

that scourged them for three generations, ultimately suffering at the hands of Trujillo and his subordinates.

Significantly, Díaz’ novel itself alludes to another aesthetic proposal, Oscar’s. Although the narrator himself tries to keep a certain distance from Oscar’s penchant for fantasy and science fiction, his appreciation for the Genres eventually legitimizes them as a compelling lens through which to see the world. An example of this is the many fantasy and science-fiction allusions and footnotes throughout the novel that underline how Dominican history is relatable to fantasy and science fiction. To further illustrate this point, Yunior mentions the fall of Mordor (p. 285) and the banishment of evil in Middle-earth from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as ancillary to the fall of Trujillo (p. 132).

In fact, when Yunior describes his incipient relationship with Oscar in their dorm room, he unintentionally reveals how much they are alike with respect to their knowledge of fantasy by saying, “Do you know what sign fool put up on our dorm door? *Speak, friend, and enter*. In fucking Elvish! (Please don’t ask me how I knew this. Please)” (p. 143). He even goes on making various references to role-playing games and movies to picture the magnitude of Oscar’s nerdism (“*Akira* I could handle, *Queen of the Demonweb Pits* I could not” [p. 144]).

The reader may assuredly get the impression that Oscar is a science-fiction and fantasy dork, especially if the allusions to novels and comic books are fully grasped. The reader may also perceive that either Yunior is apparently an omniscient narrator due to the precision in his accounts of Oscar’s hobbies; or is it that Yunior is himself a nerd who, unlike Oscar, attempts to conceal his appreciation of the world of fantasy and sci-fi from the audience?

When Yunior says, “It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?)” (p. 303), he is referring to all Caribbean people of whom he is a part. Arguably, he

evinces his sci-fi zeal in the previous quotation; particularly, he comes across as being nearly as much of a sci-fi nerd as Oscar, which further proves any suspicions aroused before: “A couple weeks ago, while I was finishing this book, I posted the thread *fukú* on the DR1 forum, just out of curiosity. These days I’m nerdy like that” (pp. 13–14). Emily Maguire (2013) shares this view in her article “Science Fiction” in the book *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, going as far as pointing out Yuniór’s presumed loneliness when she writes,

This reveals Yuniór as a closet sci-fi nerd. Yuniór can “pass” as the quintessential Dominican *tíguere*, hiding his “bat wings” – both his love of science fiction and his literate, intellectual leanings – behind his confident swagger, but he is in some ways as alone as Oscar. (p. 359)

By the same token, Yuniór, as the narrator of the novel, introduces science fiction into the streetwise language of the text and, as Maguire remarks on the same page, “It is through his voice that science fiction becomes not only the genre that shapes Oscar’s worldview, but also the language that shapes the reader’s understanding of the text as a whole.” The story is then shaped through the optic of science fiction, but Yuniór tightens it up by including other Genres, such as comics, sci-fi films and TV shows, and fantasy role-playing games and novels—all of which belong to Oscar’s canon.

Science fiction, for example, gives Oscar the opportunity to ponder his own culturally defined social role as the son of an immigrant raised in the Dominican diaspora community. This is noticeable in one of Yuniór’s footnotes when he asserts with regard to Oscar,

You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest. (p. 304)

Identity is indeed problematic for those who come into the world as inheritors of the diaspora, the composite of people whose lives have been touched by retreat. Yuniors remarks that, on the streets of New Jersey where many members of the Caribbean diaspora settle, a trace of singularity within a community that is characterized itself by its divergence in terms of skin complexion and ethnic background, gives rise to a dramatic level of estrangement. This is further illustrated in an interview with Pakistani-American journalist and playwright Wajahat Ali (2008):

DÍAZ: I think there are credible ironies in that even in communities that are ostracized by a larger, mainstream community there are people within these very communities who are ostracized for what seems to be completely arbitrary reasons. In Oscar’s case, he’s really nerdy and that’s enough to get him blacklisted from the world of Dominican-ness. I think part of what I was interested in as a writer was sort of exploring the internal tyranny of a community.

It can also be inferred that Oscar’s bearing on the X-Men (mentioned in the penultimate block quote) lies in the social ostracism they each had to endure in their daily lives. This, in turn, serves as a metaphor for the estranged youth in the Latino communities of the United States, and about how they handle the stigma of abuse from acquaintances and peers alike. However, as Yuniors elaborates, the situation does not change; it goes on to affect other groups as Oscar notes when he starts working as a teacher at Don Bosco Tech, where he had graduated:

How demoralizing was that? Every day [Oscar] watched the “cool” kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. (p. 214)

Nevertheless, Oscar’s personal experiences of estrangement from his entourage due to his lack of Dominican-ness adds to his yearning for inclusion in the in-group: “And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy” (p. 48). Ultimately, Oscar brings to light the internal tyranny of a community (mentioned in the penultimate block quote) to a degree that it makes him suicidal: “[Oscar] lapsed into that killer depression at the end of sophomore year—drank two bottles of 151 because some girl dissed him—almost fucking killing himself and his sick mother in the process” (p. 142).

Concerning the Dominican diaspora, one can see how the brutality and hemispheric reach of the Trujillo regime continue to affect people’s lives even overseas, as pointed out by Mermann-Jozwiak (2012, p. 8). The core nature of people seeking to improve their situation is not what curses them, but rather their core beliefs, as imposed upon them by the continual and compulsive hunger for power that is so exalted by the racist culture of the United States.

To keep thinking that these cultural ideals are beneficial to people is fundamentally wrong in Díaz’ viewpoint; he considers this as an abuse to which people submit voluntarily to avoid further eviction. This is seen in the example of Oscar and his “so-called friends” (p. 35) who once accepted him but actually “hurt him or dragged his trust through the mud he always crawled voluntarily back into the abuse, out of fear and loneliness, something he’d always hated himself for” (p. 35). That is why this novel reaffirms Oscar’s freedom as a person by refusing to be subjected to the abuse or *fukú* of the inherited, hypermasculine, and racist culture.

Beyond doubt, *fukú* has multiple meanings, ranging from evil eye to something much bigger. Above all, it takes on transnational dimensions and it serves to explain historical events, since the “discovery” of the Americas roughly 500 years ago to the present day, not only the amassing of power but also the oppression of peoples.

The plot and, by extension, the novel itself are partly a familial tragedy and a postcolonial story informing about a past steeped in violence and exploitation. In fact, it is a universal story, a story in which individuals abused by an overbearing, totalitarian power or malevolent, economic clout, changing the course of personal, national, and worldwide narratives, can readily identify with the protagonists. Something noteworthy here is the relationship between the past and the understanding of fukú as a colonial legacy that lingers in Dominican history and, eventually, as a kind of global-reaching force.

Although it is indisputable that Beli is at fault for the sequence of events nearly ending her life (because Dionisio’s wife, a member of the Trujillo family, knows Beli has “been telling people that [she’s] going to marry [the Gangster] and that [she’s] having his child” [p. 121]), the supernatural events surrounding her beating point to the influence fukú has on her own life. Her beating is then preceded by the premonition of a faceless man, an ominous character who appears in the novel as a harbinger of ruin (whether explicitly or implicitly suggested to be Trujillo’s doing). Despite the fact that the subchapter entitled “Choice and Consequences” alludes to Beli’s decisions leading to her beating, the preternatural component of her salvation steals the spotlight when the zafa counterspell temporarily defeats the fukú curse through the “Cabral magis” (p. 127).

The situation takes on an even more supernatural (and spiritual) tone when Beli catches a glimpse of her adoptive mother, La Inca, praying in her house: “Saw for a brief instant La Inca praying in her room—the silence that lay between them now, stronger than love” (p. 127). Her deliverance comes in the form of a black talking mongoose who rescues her from the canefields, causing her to stumble upon a group of musicians in the middle of nowhere: “We’re not leaving her, the lead singer said in a curious cibaëña accent, and only then did Beli understand that she

was saved” (p. 130). The Mongoose’s pelt is extraordinarily as black as pitch, and therefore redeems the hegemony of the Afro community by conveying that blackness can be synonymous with heroism.

As soon as she recovers, though, Santo Domingo, “[foiling] her at every turn” (p. 138), impels Beli to leave her homeland and immigrate to New Jersey, marking the beginning of the novel in both a literal and a figurative sense. Although Beli’s relationship with her husband is short-lived, it results in the birth of Oscar and Lola. The physical and psychological trauma is symbolically tied to loneliness and the unattainability of love that plagues the characters in the novel. Thus, while the tragedy of each character is deeply intimate, they all adhere to forces that are out of their reach, embedded in a narrative that pushes back against the moral, social, political, and cultural issues of living in-between two nations.

Singularly, fukú appears to be an overarching trope, which is not surprising considering the sweeping scope Díaz attributes to it. Oscar’s final words (“The beauty! The beauty!” [p. 266]) offset much of the loneliness and misfortune of the cast of characters. Such a phrase, however, is ineffectual against the fukú curse leading to Oscar’s departure at the hands of Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grod, two of the capitán’s henchmen, suggesting the continuity of Trujillo’s oppressive regime.

Likewise, the loss of Oscar’s second package containing everything he had written on his journey (“the cure to what ails us . . . The Cosmo DNA” [p. 265]) compromises Yuniór’s intention to write a manuscript nullifying the fukú curse that besets so many. Regardless of Yuniór’s best efforts to counteract fukú, its legacy of violence and oppression still pervades many aspects of Dominican society (Gonzalez-Acosta, 2008). Additionally, the broad reach of fukú, stretching as far as the international arena, thwarts its defeat.

Even so, Yunió spells out the connection between fukú and Dominican/American history through wry comments in footnotes, taking a detour onto other topics, such as Trujillo’s accomplices and their love affairs (Rubi and Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke, Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor [p. 301]; and Ramfis and Kim Novak [p. 276]). He does this with the aim of providing comic relief and denouncing the role of the United States in the Trujillo era: “(Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq.) A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the ‘democratization’ of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon” (p. 13).

Although it is an immigration and a Dominican-American story, Díaz’ novel transcends the postcolonial Dominican experience and explores the relationship between violence, power, and sexuality. Following this pattern, violence erupting from power and sexuality become an objectionable feature of hypermasculinity. It is necessary to go back to Oscar’s revolt against his captors and the sudden change he underwent (at least in terms of love) to examine Oscar’s attempts to subvert the metanarrative of enmity in the novel.

Despite being one of the most dysfunctional characters and the one for whom love is the most elusive, Oscar breaks the cycle of loneliness and strikes up an intimate liaison that sets him apart from the other characters in the novel. This significant event is in dialogue with the prominent theme of García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which seven generations of the Buendía family find themselves suffering from loneliness and a lack of intimate ties.

If there is redemption in the novel (or, ultimately, for humanity itself), it is not merely the concession made to read the voice of the oppressed, but rather to seek love at the mercy of circumstances. In this way, Oscar’s closing words, “The beauty! The beauty!” (p. 266), echo

Kurtz’ final utterance, “The horror! The horror!”, in Joseph Conrad’s (1990, p. 71) *Heart of Darkness* but, instead of emphasizing the terror of living, they point to the loveliness of life.

To put it another way, Oscar wants to impress upon Yuniór the “little intimacies” of life notwithstanding all the misfortune in his life—all the hardships he (and the other characters) endure at the hands of Trujillo and his stooges. He wants to show him, in his own manner, that a Dominican-American dork from Paterson, New Jersey, as he refers to himself, deserves to love and be loved back, just like everyone else.

When Oscar dies, he takes with him the damaging and ongoing jinx that afflicted him and his family. By virtue of his death, Yuniór grows emotionally to the point that he marries “a negrita from Salcedo” (p. 261), and he seems fine with the possibility of having children with her. In a sense, Oscar’s demise marks Yuniór’s coming-of-age as well as Lola’s, who finds herself in a relationship with Cuban Ruben and has a daughter named Isis.

Oscar’s departure then calls for the construction of a new vision of Dominican manhood and intimacy, especially for Yuniór since it makes him consider that sleeping around does not define legitimate Dominican masculinity, but rather the ability to engage with others on an affective level. In this respect, falling in love transforms Yuniór’s life guiding him down the path to gender enlightenment and, what his inner self truly longs for, a human connection.

Through Oscar, one realizes that, in becoming aware of the hardships of the past, one begins to understand the vicissitudes of the present. He is the one to embark on this journey but it is Lola’s daughter, Isis, the first child of the fourth generation in the Cabral-de León lineage, who brings forth a promising prospect for her whole family. She will be the one venturing into fukú to look for answers to a possible cure, as Yuniór implies, “If she’s her family’s daughter—

as I suspect she is—one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers. Not now, but soon” (p. 263).

All in all, Díaz finds a modern analog for Africa in what Dominicans refer to as *fukú*, a curse of the highest magnitude which, on the whole, stems from that continent. Not only does Yunior hold Trujillo accountable for the specific ancestral *fukú* that dominates Oscar’s story but, on the first page of the novel, he also synecdochically links Africa to what would grow and fester in the Dominican Republic.

Although the novel literally comes to an end with the chapter entitled “The Final Letter,” nothing has truly been settled, for the *zafa* against the *fukú* affecting the Cabral-de León family remains in limbo. Ultimately, Yunior’s *zafa* narrative does not solve the problem of dictatorship or stop the curse of colonialism. It is just a delusion since violence and impunity still prevail all over the Americas.

Conclusion

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is, almost like all Latin American *pièces de résistance*, a political novel: a dispute over the past and the present, the intimate and social connotation of power and its representations, over language and its servitudes, set in a contemporary vista. It is written with joyous fury, demonstrating great aplomb and an irony devoid of façades. It does not pretend to be a historical document, much less an arbiter of consciousness. On the contrary, its artistic merit is its lucidity.

It involves both fantasy and realism and intertwines movie and comic book references to its very end. It portrays the everlasting saga of Latino immigrants by describing their trials and tribulations, erratic families, and age-old tribal patriarchy. The title character’s nickname is a bastardization of Oscar Wilde and that bilingualism, which serves as a “radical code-switching” (Casielles-Suárez, 2013) between English and Spanish, is one of the major traits of the novel. The growth of its narrative in a bilingual setting reveals the multifaceted nature of the characters. Most importantly, the many argots of the novel, ranging from nerdspeak to ghetto slang, convey a syncretic language that constitutes the singular voice of the Dominican immigrant.

Its narrative is a book-length incantation or “a zafa of sorts” (p. 15) in Yunior’s words. Every passage, every account, every utterance, and every flash from the past is a counterspell. In this manner, Díaz’ novel is a narrative feat that delves into the experiences of first and second-generation Dominican immigrants in an attempt to map their realities and confront their transnational legacies.

Although the novel itself is a counterspell (or zafa) against the violence perpetrated by the power structures in control, Yunior’s savvy criticism saps it with paradoxical humor because it is exercised first in language itself. Only sarcasm and irony, satire and banter, can dismantle a

language that reproduces violence as a means of identity and destiny. If Trujillo’s feat was to have taken over language, recovering it demands to start over with the most disadvantaged and emaciated (“Ten million Trujillos is all we are” [p. 259]). The novel is then a space where the linguistic changes of marginal voices and actors from the Dominican Republic to the United States and their stigmatized Latino population turn fukú into fuck you.

Finally, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* explores the characters’ efforts to bear testimony to their lives and fill in the páginas en blanco that represent the instances of erasure of their own past and history. Since the narrative lays bare what the historical records omit, it dredges up the histories of diaspora, which hinge on hypermasculinity, the totalitarian and colonial discourses of gender, ethnicity, social class, racism, and power as well as the realities of the needy, violence and resettlement, and that still haunt, appall, influence, and rest across the Dominican Republic and its citizens. Notably, the novel not only centers on fukú as a far-reaching trope that extends beyond the realm of fiction but also stands up for acknowledging and embracing difference, to love and to be committed to others, accepting vulnerability as a potentially positive force.

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