

A Diasporic reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

The word diaspora suggests a line or space between two places - somehow a permanent displacement, always travelling and never fully feeling as though you have arrived. It seems to suggest that people are living somehow out of place in a new culture and yet making their own versions of it, their own versions of self, still retaining versions of the home culture. This version of the home culture is probably out of date and will never fully feel comfortable because of the experience and perceptions enabled by the self constructed in the new or other, different cultures. This paper is an attempt to trace out diasporic elements in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by the Dominican American writer Junot Diaz. The story deals with the lives of the different members of the De Leone - Calbrat family, which is under fuku, the curse that haunts the new world. It constantly moves from America to Dominican Republic and in return. The Dominican Republic's history of dictatorship plays a major role in shaping belongingness. As Oscar tries to establish his identity, reader experience poverty and diaspora.

Keywords: diaspora, dominican identity in united states, dominicanness, inclusiveness, american identity in dominican republic

1. Introduction

The word diaspora suggests a line or space between two places - somehow a permanent displacement, always travelling and never feeling as though you have arrived. It seems to suggest that people are living somehow out of place in a new culture and yet making their own versions of it, their own versions of self, while retaining the home culture. "This version of home culture is probably out of date and will never fully feel comfortable because of the experiences and perceptions enabled by the self constructed in the new or Other, different culture" (Wisker, 92). This paper is an attempt to trace out the diasporic elements in the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by the Dominican American writer Junot Diaz. The transnational representation of Dominican identity in the United States is one of the most enticing features of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel portrays the story of three generations of Dominicans or rather Dominican Americans revolving around the Cabral-de Leon family. The portrayal of three generations and therefore, three various but equally engaging realities come together to provide a consistent image of Dominicanity. The construction of Dominican identity over the years has been favoured, for the most part, by the influence of colonialism, dictatorship and imperialism. The sum of the three has given rise to a transnational identity whose center is based on the United States. The Caribbean way of looking at the world is shaped together with Presence Europeenne, Presence Americain and Presence Africaine. The three presences play as ground pillars of the Dominican culture of the diaspora in Oscar Wao. They become defining factors that filter into the way characters relate to their notions of home, to their own sense of identity, to each other and to past and present. All of these issues are problematised as the characters are drawn between the Dominican Republic and the United States. In a sense they belong to both cultures as well as neither of them, as they are neither recognized as fully Dominican nor as fully American.

The story moves back and forth in time and place throughout the novel, and holds a special place thematically. It becomes one of the novel's dominant tropes as the challenges characters face are coloured by the diaspora, interspersing the issues of the immigrant experience that are so central in the novel. In the story, Beli, the matriarch of the family, believes she can take refuge in the United States to escape from the clutches of dictatorship and the fuku that haunts the de Leon family. The fuku begins when Abelard, a well-established physician who was Beli's father and Oscar's grandfather offended Trujillo. The fuku reaches Beli when Trujillo's sister finds out that Beli is in a passionate relationship with Dionisio, a gangster who is her husband, and to add to it Beli is pregnant. Trujillo's sister threatens Beli, but she fights back and her courage leads her to being brutally beaten by Trujillo's gangsters, nearly to die. As a result of her affair with Dionisio and of the bashing, Beli gets dragged into the dreary politics of the regime in a way that endangers her life very seriously. After some days of hesitation, La Inca, Beli's stepmother, who has some acquaintances in the United States, urges Beli to leave the island despite the fact that "in [La Inca's] mind the US was nothing more and nothing less than a place overrun by gangsters, putas and no accounts" (Diaz, 154). The migratory life of Beli allows the readers to witness her experience as that of a racialised minority living in the margins of society in the United States. Hence, issues of race, class and gender come to the fore in reshaping Dominicanity. Given the aforementioned circumstances, Beli's journey to the United States is not voluntary and her final decision is triggered by her survival instinct. Already on the way to US, on the airplane she met her future husband - de Leon with whom she starts a family. Beli cannot remain in a lasting relationship and eventually faces motherhood alone. The United States represents democracy and the setting for a fresh start so as to attempt to recover from the conflicts and memories that Trujillo's dictatorship entailed for her. The family now belongs to a culture where racialised migrants are tolerated but

neither trusted nor recognized. The novel suggests that for the US society immigration implies a growing threat to white supremacy. This explains why in some instances Diaz stretches the narrative device showing that assimilation policies are implemented in an official attempt to homogenize the American experience in the story. As the plot develops immigration and assimilation policies affect characters in different degrees. The case of Beli is the most problematic because she strives to keep her Dominicaness, whereas Oscar and Lola welcome these changes to distinguish themselves from stereotypes. On the one hand, Oscar and Lola inherit certain Dominican cultural traits and the obsession to comply with them, namely sexual roles and the centrality of sexuality in the conception of the self. On the other hand Oscar and Lola are detached from the cultural context Beli comes from, and this enables them to construct an alternative Dominicaness, which benefits from an engagement with American society. The notion of inclusiveness is relevant for it is one of the foundational myths of the United States and the novel tackles this question when it devotes certain passages to the description of Oscar's and Lola's college days at Rutgers State University, and the people they come into contact with. The role of education is significant because it is through his attendance to University that Oscar develops his American identity always in combination with his Dominican undertones. Yuniors, one of the multiple narrators in a novel that critic Machado-Saez denominates as a "polyvocal one" (Maez, 2), significantly resorts to intertwining prototypical American genres, such as sci-fi or the heroic world of superheroes, with the unaccountable aspects of the Trujillato in order to narrate Oscar's reasoning and most impressive inner world. This process reflects in the construction of Oscar as a writer and in his psychological development as an individual who struggles to define his identity while in the midst of a particularly difficult stage in his life. In addition to the difficulties met while constructing a home away from home, the de-Leon family faces a profound identity crisis that stems partly from the everlasting shadow of Trujillo, especially in the case of Beli and partly from the demands of their assimilation in to a new culture. In the case of Oscar, Junot Diaz even moves forward by associating him with sci-fi and superheroes. "You really want to know what being an X-man feels like. Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary US ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (Diaz, 22). The narrator is capable to connect his own experience with that of Oscar's which in turn is also related to the experience of the author himself. Oscar and Lola cling on to the utopian space of American popular culture precisely because such space empowers them to take on a more active role in the construction of their hyphenated identity. American popular culture offers them a myriad of alternatives that differ significantly from their exposure to the "rigid" Dominicaness Beli epitomizes. This is so especially in the case of Oscar who fosters the scope of becoming a prominent and respectable writer, the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkein, whose blend of Africa, Europe and Latin America will enable him to appeal to various sensitivities and engage with different cultural discourses. The exploration of Oscar's desire shapes the inner, already bubbling, transnational and transcultural identity that Diaz's text endorses. After her migration into America Beli learns very quickly her new role as a racialised immigrant in the United States and that it entitles her only to a precarious life and occupations where she cannot aim high. According to Oscar

2. Ortega Montero

Beli represents the archetype of a hardened immigrant. Thus Beli realizes she is merely a drop in the ocean; one more alienated other trapped in the jungle of Urban modernity, where she aims to revert a run of bad fortune; she feels aimless, disoriented and insignificant among the crowd while trying to scrape by in the United States. The fact that Beli's husband abandons the family contributes to destabilizing Beli as the household becomes a heavy burden for her. The novel portrays the de Leon family nearly as a dysfunctional family, and more specifically, depicts Beli, the mother, neglecting and abusing her children, as the agent who enforces on them an education and bringing up which she had naturalised under the Trujillato. She herself is both a victim and an instigator of fear the dictatorship spread. (Montero, 44)

Beli feels isolated as she loses her authority over her children. The shadow of fuku is always believed to be on the family and the de Leons being a dysfunctional family may also be a part of it. The American experience and their living conditions discomfort them and make them feel both uneasy and displaced despite all the material progress and commodities the United States has to offer. "Diaspora was Trujillo's pay back to pueblo that betrayed him. Fuku" (Diaz, 5). As a whole, the past of the de Leon family is a heavy burden that conditions the anxieties they have to deal with as a part of the diaspora, as a racialised minority in the United States and as an emerging culture already in the making. According to critic Machado-Saez, "the formation of the Dominican diaspora was intimately tied to the violence that the Trujillo dictatorship used to forcibly silence opposing voices" (Saez). In the novel roots of Dominican identity are to be found in the regime of Trujillo which caused the migration of large number of Dominicans to America represented by the setting of the novel in America. With this strategy, Diaz allows the reader of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to learn that despite being away from the island, they have managed to integrate the core of Dominican culture in their daily routines. But in Santo Domingo, Oscar and Lola are not accepted as Dominicans. The following passage sheds light on the feeling of awkwardness that Lola experiences at school in the

3. Dominican Republic

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

Lola identifies herself more like an outsider than as an insider for she is aware of her distinctive role in class. Oscar's situation, on the contrary, takes a different shape than Lola's. The analysis of Oscar's Dominicaness seems to be reduced to his inability to embody the model of all powerful and dominant masculinity which is supposedly the trait shared by all Dominican men. Oscar struggles to find himself on a safer ground by becoming a writer after a complex upbringing in a New Jersey ghetto as part of the diaspora. His writing is an attempt to make sense of the world that has surrounded him as a child of the diaspora. Oscar has trouble engaging with the society that produced him.

Alienation and lack of “sameness” make Oscar pursue his personal agenda by becoming a writer. The reshaping of Dominicanness, in the terms Oscar explores it, implies the transformation as well as the renewal of a whole cultural set of beliefs. In doing so, he incorporates a whole bunch of American undertones, specifically the nerdy nuances- sci-fi, superheroes- he identifies with and those elements reshape his blurred perception of the world. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao recounts the pressures that shape the historiography of a diasporic community. Oscar and his family through their various experiences in the Dominican Republic and America wonderfully portrays what it means to be a diasporic community, part of two different cultures and part of none at the same time.

4. References

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