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From Conquest to ‘Culocracy’ to Diaspora:

Physical Intimacy in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

One thing you can count on in Santo Domingo. Not the lights, not the law.

Sex.

That never goes away.

— Lola, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Whether consensual or weaponized, sex is always linked to inherited trauma in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Published in 2007, the novel ironically incorporates both graphic and tender scenes of physically intimacy, the majority of them sexual, throughout the story of a virgin’s quest for that very intimacy. The narrator, Yuniors, is a young Dominican American who recounts Oscar’s lackluster love life in a decidedly machista tone. His own promiscuity and adherence to machismo culture heavily influences this narration. Yuniors frames the plot around the titular hero’s virginity and the sexual dominion of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (1930 – 1961). While *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does not fall into one

simple field of classification, this paper will discuss the text as part of a literary field of dictatorship novels. My approach includes examination of the work's depiction of patriarchal systems of oppression that preceded dictatorship in the Caribbean, the Trujillato itself, and the persistence of authoritarian structures in the Dominican Republic and personal worlds of Oscar and the Dominican diaspora following the official demise of the regime. Using this lens, I will investigate diasporic sexuality post-dictatorship and how postmemory of colonial and state-sanctioned violence influences physical intimacy after the fall of authoritarian regime in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I argue that Díaz inscribes language of dispossession and violence into scenes of physical intimacy. These images echo the theft and deprivation of land, property, resources and human rights present throughout the Dominican Republic's history of colonialism, slavery and dictatorship.

This second-generation narrator's account of this history of the de León family demonstrates the transgenerational structure of postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012). Hirsch defines the concept:

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before— to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Hirsch 5)

Belicia de León, her children, and Yuniór de Las Casas cannot escape the cyclical, transgenerational nature of trauma that Junot Díaz identifies in his own life. Indeed, in the author's firsthand account of his own childhood rape, "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma," Díaz laments, "Trauma is a time traveller, an ouroboros that reaches back and devours everything that came before" (Silence 24). With each new generation, trauma is reborn. It creeps into the novel's scenes of physical intimacy, as Díaz injects language of historical violence and theft to into private moments behind closed doors. The "collective and cultural trauma" associated with Dominican sexuality and intimacy persists in some form in each character's intimate experiences.

There is debate whether *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Junot Díaz's overall body of further mythologizes or dismantles the reputation of the dictator and the real, brutal history of the Trujillato. In *Masculinity after Trujillo: The Politics of Gender in Dominican Literature*, Maja Horn argues that "the treatment of the theme of the Trujillato in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* echoes some of the problematic commonplaces of other canonical Dominican dictatorship novels that ... tend to foreground and ultimately exoticize the dictator and his regime by fixating on its violent and sexual excesses" (Horn 129). While I agree that scenes of sex and violence occur very frequently, often together, throughout the novel, I believe they dismantle rather than exoticize dictatorship. Díaz presents Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina as the embodiment of the hyper masculine sexuality that brutalizes native Dominicans and their descendants. Though the fictional Trujillo is most often linked to sex throughout the novel, I will discuss how the true implications of his exploits are reflected in the physical intimacies of the powerless.

This aligns with scholar Jennifer Harford Vargas' position that Díaz, through Yunior, reclaims the cultural narrative from Trujillo. Díaz inverts the traditional power dynamic between oppressors and oppressed by having a member of the Dominican diaspora tell Oscar's story. The author quite literally gives voice to characters that typically exist at the margins of society, forcibly silenced by dictatorship and its unspeakable memory. Through this narrative style, the author successfully highlights "a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience ... [that] is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational removed" (Hirsch 5). The dictator may be one of the novel's main antagonists, but it is not Trujillo's story. In fact, he is fairly separate from the events of Díaz narrative, especially in scenes of physical intimacy. In "Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Vargas discusses how Yunior's very role as narrator undermines the complete narrative control that dictators typically enjoy. Examining the novel's structure, she argues Trujillo is "doubly made minor in the narrative hierarchy of power ... [and] is relegated to the position of a minor character in the novel's plot at the same time that he is minoritized as a footnote in the novel's structure ... The positioning of Trujillo within the footnotes literally lowers Trujillo on the page. This structural move mirrors the way in which Yunior deflates Trujillo linguistically" (Vargas 14). This allows the descendants of victims of the Trujillato and the slavery and colonialism that came before to reclaim narrative space as their trauma and history is mediated through Beli and her children's intimate experiences.

One of the earliest scenes of intimacy in the novel echoes the Caribbean's history of slavery and physically represents how that burden of internalized trauma passes from Dominican mother to a daughter of the diaspora. In one of the few sections of the book narrated by Oscar's

sister, Belicia calls her daughter into the bathroom to examine her breast, and Lola finds her mother “naked from the waist up, her bra slung about her waist like a torn sail, the scar on her back as vast and inconsolable as a sea. ...mother’s breasts are immensities. One of the wonders of the world” (Wao 51). The imagery in this vulnerable moment is rooted in the Middle Passage. The “torn sail” and connection between the mother’s physical scars and the emptiness of a “vast and inconsolable ...sea” signal that Lola is about to be transported into a “world” history of generational pain. Like her ancestors, she is unwilling to move to that space, yet captive to the journey. The scene continues this metaphor as Lola observes:

But for all your similarities, the tides of inheritance have yet to reach your chest ... and then suddenly without warning you do feel something. A knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot. And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change. You become light-headed and you can feel a throbbing in your blood, a beat, a rhythm, a drum. (52-3)

The text utilizes the physical connection between Lola’s touch and the intimate part of her mother’s body to reveal the cancer festering within Beli. The physical knot is a metaphor for the “secretive” trauma of Beli’s life in Santo Domingo, which she carries with her to the United States and carries on to her children. Like a slave bound to a ship, this knot ties her to the dark past. It is significant that the cancer resides in a part of Beli’s body that is a symbol of sexuality and maternal caregiving. The same breasts that Lola’s “father could never get enough of” nourished Lola as an infant, and now they communicate “the tides of inheritance” to her as an adolescent. Through these allusions, the text symbolically introduces the collective trauma of the

Middle Passage into the physically intimate scene. Beli is not only showing Lola her cancer, she is passing it to the next generation. Through this familial scene of sickness and reluctant discovery, the novel “attempt[s] to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma ... Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world “bleed” from one generation to the next” (Hirsch 34). Lola physically feels this transference in her throbbing blood. A drum rhythm ushers in her premonition, a suggestive echo of the drumming on the decks of slave ships used to keep slaves physically fit as slavers sailed them toward centuries of bondage in the Americas. In this way, “the screams of the enslaved” that open the novel subtly connect Lola to the fukú and the introductory warning that “we are all of us its children” (Wao 1, 2).

Like the distant memory of the Middle Passage, indigenous Dominican legends also inform scenes of physical intimacy. In one particularly lengthy footnote, Yunior describes the myth of Anacaona, orally passed down from generation to generation. In its entirety, this footnote takes up the majority of the page, overpowering the principal text despite its smaller font. This sizing substantiates Anacaona’s significance to the Caribbean and, more specifically, her significant to the novel’s central story about the de León family. The legend reveals a history of inescapable danger surrounding physical intimacy on the island:

29. Anacaona, a.k.a. the Golden Flower. One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the World.... Anacaona was the wife of Caonabo, one of the five caciques who ruled our Island at the time of the “Discovery” ...

A common story you hear about Anacaona in the DR is that on the eve of her execution she was offered a chance to save herself: all she had to do was marry a Spaniard who was obsessed with her. (See the trend? Trujillo wanted the Mirabal Sisters, the Spaniard wanted Anacaona.) Offer that choice to a contemporary Island girl and see how fast she fills out that passport application. Anacaona, however, tragically old-school, was reported to have said, Whitemen, kiss my hurricane ass! And that was the end of Anacaona. (Wao 244)

Anacaona's refusal is one of the original stories of sexual resistance in the New World. The referential titles that introduce the character, "Founding Mother" and "most beautiful Indian," emphasize both her matriarchal and indigenous importance in Dominican culture. Yet, for all her distinction, she is unable to survive the European "discovery" of the Caribbean. Her unceremonious execution after refusing colonial advances demonstrates that chastity is not a viable means of survival under patriarchal rule. This idea plays out in the intimate lives of Lola and Beli, as both women understand that there is no place for the "old-school" virtuous in the Trujillato or the Dominican diaspora if they mean to stay alive. The oral history of Anacaona casts female sexual relationships in terms of survival. Lola, capitalizes on this history of sexual exchange during her stay in the Dominican Republic. Desperate for money to travel, she prostitutes herself to a classmate's father, frankly recounting, "I didn't bother with the romance. I let him take me to a love motel on our first "date." ... That was my big puta moment. I knew he had the money, otherwise I wouldn't have asked, and it's not like I was robbing from him" (206). Like her mother before her, Lola uses sex to survive, continuing the cycle of trauma that commodifies female bodies. Only in her mother's homeland does she engage in physical intimacy driven by monetary exchange. According to Yuniors, "during her last months in the DR

Beli spent more time inside the love motels than she had in school” (127). Her daughter’s return to the same sordid setting signifies the transgenerational nature of trauma taught by the myth of Anacaona. Yuniór’s implication that the “contemporary Island girl” would willingly trade sex for the chance to travel or emigrate reflects Beli and Lola’s postmemory of the consequences of Anacaona’s chaste principals. In “‘Nothing ever ends’: Archives of Written and Graphic Testimony in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” Lauren Gantz expands on these generational similarities, explaining, “Díaz suggests that when trauma is transgenerational and transnational, so, too, are witnessing and testimony. Thus, Dominican Americans such as Yuniór, Oscar, and Lola, who are a generation removed from the ravages of the Trujillato, should be considered witnesses to that regime’s cruelty” (Gantz 132). Through centuries of sexual dehumanization, first under colonialism and then dictatorship, Anacaona’s decedents have learned that must treat their bodies as a kind of dictatorial current if they wish to survive. Transmission and acceptance of this sex as commodity maintains the cycle of what Díaz defines as “the intergenerational harm that systemic sexual violence has inflicted on African diasporic communities” (Silence 24).

Anacaona’s final words reappear in Beli’s sexual relationships when she is living in the Dominican Republic. If Yuniór’s retelling is to be believed, Anacaona ironically sexualizes herself in her last breath, chiding the Spaniards to kiss her “hurricane ass” centuries before the “consummate culocrat” establishes the Trujillato (Wao 154). The novel introduces Jack Pujols and the Gangster, Beli’s lovers in her homeland, with hurricane imagery. Beli is first transfixed with “the hurricane whorl at the back of Jack Pujols’s crew cut,” and later takes up with a Gangster that comes from a home that is “abandoned and hurricane-ruined” (85, 134). The image of a hurricane as part of Beli’s childhood love’s physical appearance and the real debris of

hurricane in the childhood home of her second love forebodingly links them to Anacoana's tragic end. Indeed, the Gangster reciprocates Beli's adoration of him because he is "grounded by the hurricane winds of history" (126). In a scene of physical intimacy, he asserts that "the burn scars on her back: It looks like a painting of a ciclón ... una tormenta en la madrugada," directly likening a part of Beli's body to a hurricane, in Spanish no less, as Anacoana likened her own body to a hurricane (127). In this way, Díaz carefully plants language in Beli's story that echoes the dying words of an indigenous woman murdered. This subtly connects the dangers of Oscar's mother's sexual experiences to the dispossession and violence of the Dominican Republic's colonial past.

Belica's first sexual relationship further connects to the brutal European conquest of Hispaniola and slavery outlined in the first pages of the novel. The description of the boy's appearance establishes his significant social status in a patriarchy born of the conquistadors and plantation owners:

Jack Pujols of course: the school's handsomest (read: whitest) boy, a haughty slender melniboién of pure European stock whose cheeks looked like they'd been knapped by a master and whose skin was unflawed by scar, mole, blemish, or hair, his small nipples were the pink perfect ovals of sliced salchicha. (Wao 89)

Jack's "whitest" skin and perceived "pure European" lineage distinguishes the boy among even his upper class schoolmates, granting him notoriety and admiration because of the students' historically based understanding of what power looks like. His physical appearance also suggests he is descended from a slave "master," contrasting his privileged heritage and skin "unflawed by a scar" with Beli's childhood as "an orphan [with] horrible scars from that time...[and] despised black skin" (80). The union of these two bodies symbolically mirrors the sexual violence and

power disparity of slavery. As Melissa Gonzalez observes in “‘The Only Way Out is In’: Power, Race, and Sexuality Under Capitalism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” “Díaz is not just demonstrating the pain and violence that brown bodies, female bodies, and non-normative bodies have been subjected to because of colonialism and its resulting hegemonic technologies, he is also showing us how these subjectivities are formed, internalized, transmitted, and reproduced” (289). Though Oscar’s mother enters the relationship willingly, the physical characteristics of both partners suggest how a history of oppression endures even in consensual relationships. In “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” Aníbal Quijano, whose influence Díaz has cited, theorizes how the region’s colonial past influences individuals’ understanding of self, arguing, “When applied specifically to Latin American history and reality, the Eurocentric knowledge perspective acts as a kind of distorting mirror... The tragedy here is that we all have been led, knowingly or not, willingly or not, to see and to accept that image as our own reality and ours only” (Quijano 222). Díaz’s fiction reflects Quijano’s assessment of how the Caribbean’s geopolitical history drives what is desirable in intimate relationships. In Belí and Jack’s case, she is attracted to him because of his physical appearance and the status it engenders, while Jack only engages her in secret, treating her only as an object of desire.

Díaz incorporates language of dispossession and conquest in Belí’s recollection of this first sexual experience. Excited by “the future that her new body represented,” Belí naively engages in painful sex with Jack, who mistreats that body for his own pleasure (Wao 94). In the novel’s description of her first intimate experience, Belí “finally understood why the other boys had given him the nickname Jack the Ripper” and compares his penis to “a destroyer of worlds” that made her “feel like she was being run through with a cutlass” (99, 100). By associating Jack to a real British serial killer, Jack the Ripper, and comparing his penis with a ‘cutlass,’ a sword

commonly used as a naval weapon by European sailors, the author links their intimate relationship to novel's opening in which Columbus arrives in the New World. The Dominican boy, characterized as a "hallowed vessel" whose friends are his "lieutenants," represents the brutal European takeover of the Caribbean (90, 91). He is the first sexual partner to "discover" Beli's body, setting in motion her search for love and resulting downfall the same way "the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world" (2). These parallels demonstrate the repeated trauma of history in physical intimacy in *Oscar Wao* even when both characters are willing participants.

Moving from language of conquest, Díaz communicates Beli's next sexual relationship with the Gangster using language of enslavement, furthering a motif of dispossession around physical intimacy. The Gangster's rise to power under the Trujillo dictatorship is due, in part, to his profession, as Yunior narrates, "where our man truly excelled, where he smashed records and grabbed gold, was the flesh trade. ... there was something about the binding, selling, and degradation of women that brought out the best in the Gangster; he had an instinct for it, a talent – call him the Caracaracol of Culo" (121). The Gangster's success and aptitude for sex trafficking directly involves him in a kind of modern day slavery, injecting the country's history of slavery into Beli's bedroom. Indeed, even Yunior's style of narration indicates a learned social tolerance, if not acceptance, for "the flesh trade," as he praises the Gangster's "talent" and "instinct" for trafficking with particular bravado, while completely ignoring the victims of industry. This aligns with what Yunior outlines as the guiding policy of Trujillo's government, mocking, "If the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was)" (Wao 217). By rebranding the dictatorship in vulgar slang, Yunior highlights the disparate power dynamics in

sexual relations under authoritarian rule. Gonzalez observes how these dynamics influence Beli's choice in sexual partner, asserting, "Beli's dream to find a man is inseparable from her entrepreneurial approach to romantic relationships: she pursues and loves both the upper-class Jack Pujols and the wealthy Gangster, whom she hopes will enable her to escape the Dominican Republic by setting her up in Miami, that bastion of both U.S. and Latin American cultural hybridity as well as robust trade relations and consumerism" (Gonzalez 289). The character's understanding of sexual relationships connects to historically engrained cultural attitudes surrounding women and social mobility. While on a personal level she desires love, she subconsciously responds to the Trujillato's policies of sexual exploitation by intimately engaging with men that weaponize sex for personal gain. Her consensual involvement with one of Trujillo's power players demonstrates how state-sanctioned violence influences private relationships, as Beli sees involvement with the Gangster as one of the few ways to escape her life.

Language of dispossession once again emerges in scenes of intimacy with regard to the Gangster's sexual motivations. His background story reveals how Caribbean political anxieties drive sexual desire:

He sensed his own mortality and that of the Trujillo in the fall of Cuba. Which might explain why, when he met Beli, he jumped on her stat. I mean what straight middle-aged brother had not attempted to regenerate himself through the alchemy of young pussy... The sexy isthmus of her waist alone could have launched a thousand yolas and while the upper-class boys might have had their issues with her, the Gangster was a man of the world, had fucked more prietas than you could count. He didn't care about that shit. What

he wanted to suck Beli's enormous breasts, to fuck her pussy until it was a mango-juice swamp, to spoil her senseless so that Cuba and his failure there disappeared. As the viejos say, *clavo saca clavo*, and only a girl like Beli could erase the debacle of Cuba from a brother's mind. (Wao 123-4)

The rise of the communism in Cuba introduces a new power structure in the region where the public, ostensibly, has more opportunity and political influence. This upsets the certain, prescribed imbalance of dictatorship that the Gangster and the rest of the Trujillato rely on for control and individual sense of purpose. To escape this reality, the Gangster transforms Beli's body into a kind of mythical island. He flees Cuba for the "isthmus of her waist," using a turn of phrase, "launched a thousand yolas," usually affiliated with Helen of Troy and the armadas that went to reclaim her and, more significantly, conquer new territory. This allusion both sexualizes Beli and links her experience of physical intimacy to a story of warfare. The passage includes another mythical element as the description of her lover's motivations casts her body, specifically her vagina, in magical terms. "The alchemy of young pussy" suggests that, for Dominican men, physical intimacy has transformative potential. Sex serves as refuge from the political revolutions of surrounding islands, connecting Beli and the Gangster's relationship to authoritarian anxieties and violent response to popular uprising. His desire "to suck Beli's enormous breasts" alludes to sucking a land's supply dry for personal gain, echoing colonial harvesting of indigenous resources. The characterization of turning her vagina into "a mango-juice swamp" further underscores this connection, as the reference to Dominican fruit indicates how the Gangster believes sex with Beli will prove fruitful in erasing his own failures and sense of mortality. The Gangster immortalizes authoritarian regime's presence in intimate spaces by engaging in a recurring cycle of sexual inequality maintained through patriarchal rule.

Díaz's language implies that, for Beli's part, she risks becoming the "spoil[s]" of war for "a man of the world," likening her partner to a conqueror traveling from island to island to reap the benefits of the region to "regenerate himself". Her dependent sexual relationship reflects the surrounding subjugation of Trujillo's Dominican Republic, in which, the dictator "came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treat[ing] the country like it was a plantation and he was the master" (2). The ruler's methods of oppression are "familiar" in that they have historical precedent in the Caribbean's history of slavery. Melissa Gonzalez summarizes Díaz's assertion that "Caribbean people are the children of rape, as their mixed European, African, and indigenous ancestry was produced by multiple literal rapes as well as the psychic subjugation of colonialism" (Gonzalez 281). Yuniors likens Trujillo's supreme dominance to that of a slave owner more than once, again asserting, "He acted like it was his very own plantation, acted like he owned everything and everyone, ...took women away from their husbands on their wedding nights and then would brag publically about "the great honeymoon" he'd had the night before" (Wao 225). By brazenly laying sexual claim to new brides Trujillo exemplifies how, like slave with master, rape of citizen by dictator was state-sanctioned. The novel illustrates how this dictatorial violence sabotages physical intimacy in consensual relationships like that of Beli and the Gangster, as is the case in their reunion scene after Beli miraculously survives her beating in the canefields:

She tried to talk about the dead baby but he waved the diminutive ghost away with a flick of his wrist and proceeded to remove her enormous breasts from the vast armature of her bra ...

He did not mention his wife, of course, and she did not ask. It would have broken her. Later, when he started coming, she tried to hold on to him, but he wrenched free and came on the dark ruined plain of her back.

Like chalk on a blackboard, the Gangster joked. (Wao 162-3)

It is notable that, in spite of the brutality that Beli endured, the acknowledgment of the Gangster's lawful sexual partner is what "would have broken her." The couple shares an unspoken understanding that they must suppress the reality of the Gangster's adultery in order to maintain the semblance of their relationship. Together, they gag the truth. Their lack of verbal exchange underscores the learned cultural silence surrounding the violence that frequently results from sexual relations under dictatorship. The Gangster easily flicks aside the "diminutive ghost" in the bedroom with them to make space for sexual desire. By swiftly casting off the dead, the Gangster symbolizes how state sanctioned violence prohibits sexual intimacy from developing into something more, because of their environment quashes the honesty necessary for emotional connection. When Beli attempts to hold the Gangster inside of her, he forcefully separates himself and asserts dominance in a degrading sexual act. By ejaculating on her back, he sexualizes the same "vast scar like nothing anybody had seen before" that was exposed when a teacher discovered Beli and her first lover, Jack Pujols (100). In comparing his semen to chalk, the Gangster metaphorically writes himself into his partner's violent history. Taken a step further, the novel describes that same burn scar as "a monsterglove of festering ruination extending from the back of her neck to the base of her spine. A bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha" (257). This characterization reveals Beli's scar as a symbol of both her personal victimization, history of world conflict, and, most poignantly, her improbable survival amidst it all. Díaz's language relates her to the survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Like those victims, Oscar's mother bears physical signs of inescapable trauma inflicted on the innocent. Yuniór narrates how, to her detriment, Beli "the daughter of the Fall, recipient of its heaviest radiations, loved atomically," and the reoccurring appearance of the scar in scenes of intimacy reflects that even physical connections are, quite literally, marred by a world history of violence (100). Furthermore, as her atomic love implies, physical intimacy also runs the risk of inviting additional trauma, as it can be a ticking time bomb for the participants or the future generations born of that intimacy.

Beli's son Oscar is that future generation, and his desire for physical intimacy with the prostitute Ybón reflects how postmemory of the Trujillo dictatorship and previous oppressive patriarchies complicates the physical intimacy for members of the diaspora. As a sex worker, Ybón embodies the sexual dispossession of female bodies throughout the Dominican Republic's history. She is a walking metaphor for the violence and trauma, symbolized most clearly after her powerful boyfriend, a police captain, discovered Oscar kissing her and "put a .44 Magnum in her vagina and asked her who she *really* loved" (304). This is perhaps the most violent sexual image in the novel, and Oscar, the well-mannered virgin, plays a role in initiating the action. His presence jeopardizes Ybón and is indicative of the tension between the Diaspora and islanders. Yuniór highlights this disparity in describing Oscar and other second generation Dominicans' return to the homeland, observing, "Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can ... it's one big party; one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German, and Italian tourist love to rape – yes, sir nothing like a Santo Domingo summer" (271 - 2). Ybón later uses those same nationalities to describe her customers that could have had her "working this whole summer" (287). Her

physical intimacy with these men is always threateningly beneath the surface of her and Oscar's relationship, so much so that when he found "three discarded condom foils on the floor around her bed, had asked, Are you having trouble with incubuses?" (290). By comparing her customers to violent mythological beings, Oscar links the tourists to other historical groups of outsiders have historically committed sexual abuses against natives. That they arrive with the "expelled children" and occupy Ybón's bed when Oscar is absent indicates how members of the diaspora are caught between worlds, hindering their ability to occupy either of the two countries comfortably and find an intimate partner.

Díaz purposefully situates Ybón's house that "she bought... culeando" two houses down from "the house that Diaspora had built" where Oscar's pseudo grandmother, La Inca, resides (279). That a prostitute and the pious matriarch of the de León family share a street represents how close to home the sexual exchange without intimacy is for Oscar and his family. Spatially, the distance also suggests that there is only one house, or person, between La Inca and the prostitute, a place that could be held by Oscar's mother or sister. "In Sucia Love: Losing, Lying, and Leaving in Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her*," Deborah Vargas expands on female characters in Díaz's works, such as Ybón, and their relationship to intimacy, explaining, "Sucias – unlike women whose feminine gender privilege through whiteness or economic class advantage – ... cultivate clever tactics to avoid dispossession and disappearance. In order to avoid being the loser or being the loss (of structural systems that normalize gender and sexuality), they learn to lag behind, opt out, and move around the promises they know too well were never intended for them" (335). This clever circumnavigation of historical precedent is employed by Ybón and evident in Oscar's confusion about her person. Though he desires Ybón, Oscar cannot fully understand what she even represents for him, as Yuniór explains, "... there was something

slightly detached about her too; as though (Oscar's words now) she were some marooned alien princess who existed partially in another dimension She relished the short bursts of attention she provoked for men, but not anything sustained" (Wao 282). The language that Oscar uses to describe a person he wishes to be physically intimate with shows the barriers faced after the fall of authoritarian regime that allowed a space for 'Sucias,' as Vargas terms them, to adapt. His descriptive term "alien" is also a pejorative term for an immigrant and a projection of Oscar's own anxieties in the person he wishes to sleep with. The idea that she is "marooned" harkens back to the island terms Díaz used to describe Beli's body from the Gangster's point of view, but it evolves in Oscar and Ybón's situation, as he sees her divided from him by "another dimension." From his point of view, she is like a foreigner, even though she lives in the Dominican Republic and he does not. His projection onto Ybón demonstrates how the diaspora subconsciously struggle with their own identity and bring that tension into how they view their intimate partners and relationships.

This inherited trauma also informs the consensual relationship between Lola and Yuniór. Lola seems most keenly aware of their shared heritage and its sabotaging potential on the night that they are first physically intimate:

We went to her place on Handy and before I could really put a hurt on her she stopped everything, dragged me up from her toto by my ears ...

She looked at me until I couldn't stand it anymore and then she said: Just don't lie to me, Yuniór.

I won't, I promised

Don't laugh. My intentions were pure. (Wao 199)

The narrator uses pain to characterize his sex scene with Lola, describing “a hurt” intended to render her powerless against his well-honed sexual prowess. She counters this action by physically dragging Yuniór away from the sex act and forcing him to look at her rather than her vagina. It is telling that the intimacy in her knowing look unnerves Yuniór. In José Saldívar’s “Junot Díaz’s Search for Decolonial Aesthetics and Love,” the critic observes that “Yuniór’s particular blindness and insights allow us to see how his culture’s heteronormativity and his masculinist ideas about women so often leave him feeling utterly disconnected or alienated from his lovers, family, and community” (325). In spite of his feelings for Lola, he cannot stand her gaze, because it contradicts the impersonal sexual gratification that he has come to expect from women. As Gonzalez observes, “Yuniór, who serves as Oscar’s foil, demonstrates the losses implicit in succeeding at hypersexual masculinity” (Gonzalez 280). Men of the Trujillato, Caribbean slavers, and the colonizers that came before them so ingrained male sexual dispossession of their partners that Yuniór reflexively dislikes when Lola takes possession on his face and stops their intimate moment. It challenges his inherited notions by introducing female agency uncharacteristic of Yuniór’s previous sexual experiences. Gonzalez later continues that, “Yuniór seems to suffer as much as Oscar does from the requirements of Dominican masculinity, even though, in his case, he fulfills the requirements all too well by being a helplessly self-sabotaging womanizer, even as he also struggles to undo the limitations imposed by this version of ethnic masculinity” (287). Yuniór’s demand that the reader not laugh at his promise to her implies that the very idea that their relationship could break the cycle of unfulfilled intimacy is a bad joke. Lola’s lament on their “last night as novios [when] she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are” cements the idea that even after the fall of dictatorship, the next generation cannot truly

separate themselves from that legacy of postmemory of oppression when they want to be physically intimate (324).

Physical intimacy affects nearly every character in the *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in both plot and subplot. These exchanges and the language of dispossession and violence present in intimate sexual exchanges echoes the subjugation of colonialism, slavery and dictatorship. This contextualizes Oscar, Yunior, Lola and Beli's individual struggles with sexual relationships. The novel, therefore, sheds light on the larger issue of postmemory surrounding physical intimacy, breaking a largely silent culture about sexuality and physical expression and offering a fictional avenue to help the next generation of diaspora understand and challenge the cycle.

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