

Between Here and There:
Aspects of the Diasporic Experience in
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz

By

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Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen tar for seg romanen *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Romanen er skrevet av den dominikansk-amerikanske forfatteren Junot Díaz, og skildrer livet til Oscar De León. Oscar bor sammen med sin familie, moren Belicia og søsteren Lola, i Paterson, New Jersey. Gjennom romanen følger vi Oscar fra hans barndom til han som ung voksen blir drept i Den Dominikanske Republikk. Denne lesingen av romanen utforsker hvordan den formidler en immigrants opplevelser på en “sann” måte gjennom fiksjon. Samfunnet som er Oscars hjem kan defineres som et dominikansk diaspora, noe som farger hvordan karakterene opplever sin verden. Jeg har lagt stor vekt på diaspora, som fungerer som et overordnet tema i romanen. Karakterene er i konstant bevegelse mellom den dominikanske og den amerikanske kulturen, og denne konstante navigasjonen er utfordrende for dem. Det er spesielt Oscar som har problemer med å finne sin plass i samfunnet. I tillegg til dette, sliter Oscar med overvekt og at hans jevnaldrende ser på han som en nerd. Oscar sin hverdag består for en stor del av tegneserier, rollespill og science fiction. Disse interessene, som fungerer som virkelighetsflukt for ham, kommer også til syne i selve romanen. Jeg utforsker hvordan Díaz bruker disse amerikanske sjangrene i samspill med karibisk litteratur for å gjenspeile den fragmenterte opplevelsen til immigranter som Oscar. I tillegg til selve historien om Oscar og hans familie, bidrar selve komposisjonen til å formidle denne opplevelsen til leseren. Historien om Oscar blir jevnlig “avbrutt” av kapitler som omhandler historien til flere av hans familiemedlemmer. Disse finner alle sted i en fortid som, sammen med det å leve i et diaspora, påvirker Oscars dannelsesprosess. Jeg utforsker derfor også hvordan romanen kan leses som en *Bildungsroman*.

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Preface

Given how recent *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, published in 2007, it seems to me that there does not exist a whole lot of criticism yet, and there are few articles which treat the novel specifically. However, the articles “‘Reassembling the Fragments’ Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” by Monica Hanna, and “Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” by Daniel Bautista, explore different issues within the novel.

In “Reassembling the Fragments” Monica Hanna explores different features of the novel such as intertextuality, historiography, Caribbean discourse in diaspora, and comic books and other “nerd genres.” Even though I explore some of the same issues as Hanna, her aim to demonstrate how the different aspects figure in history writing. She concludes that “the novel presents an attempt to write a new history of the Dominican Republic” (Hanna, 516). My focus differs from Hanna’s, as I am exploring how the novel portrays living within this kind of history.

In “Comic Book Realism,” Daniel Bautista explores Magic Realism in relation with the modern genres of science-fiction and comic books, what Hanna typically calls “nerd genres.” Bautista claims that a “comic book realism” emerges through Díaz’ narrative. This he defines as “a new kind of mixed genre that highlights the extent to which his young protagonists grasp their reality through popular cultural forms, like comic books, which influence them as much as if not more than older traditional Dominican beliefs in magic” (Bautista 2010). Like Bautista, I focus on how the narrative portrays how the protagonist(s) grasp their reality. However, I factor in other kinds of writing, and discuss the “nerd genres” mainly in relation to works of other genres.

Through this exploration of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* I demonstrate how Díaz' narrative conveys the immigrant experience in a "true" form through fiction. As the cultural framework we encounter in the novel is a Dominican diaspora in the United States, the notion of diaspora filter into the novel in terms of the historical, cultural, aesthetic, and personal. It figures as a kind of orchestrating principle, and consequently this thesis aims to explore how a diasporic in-between position inhabited by the characters in the novel can be examined from different angles. I have pieced together a theoretical and critical framework that I feel responds to the aspects of the narrative that I find the most intriguing and have wanted to focus on. The novel conveys a rather new experience, which I believe demands a new framework.

In the Introduction, I present Junot Díaz through a brief look at his life and work. Then, I move on to a general overview of the term diaspora so as to situate the story in more general contexts. The specifically Dominican diaspora and its role in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is to be treated in Chapter One. Here, I examine the various ways diaspora can be defined and related to in contemporary criticism, and how it figures along with the fukú, another dominant trope in the novel. The fukú is the Old World curse that haunts the New World, and is closely linked to African spirituality through *Presence Africaine*. Together with diaspora, it contributes to tie the Old and the New Worlds together in an ambivalent relation spatially as well as temporally.

In Chapter Two, the main focus is on the presence of other texts in the novel and the intertextual relations their presence brings about. I examine how the in-between position of the characters figure in with Díaz' extended use of fragments from other texts. The emphasis is on the novel's two epigraphs within the frames of Bakhtin's dialogism, as they can be seen as representatives of different world views engaging in a dialogue within the text.

The story in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is also the story of a character's coming-of-age. With this as its point of departure, the third chapter examines how the novel negotiates the *Bildungsroman* genre. In order to do so, I consider what the term traditionally has entailed, and how it figures in contemporary literary theory before exploring how it relates to the novel.

Introduction

Junot Díaz was born on December 31, 1968, in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. At the age of seven his family moved to the United States to live with his father who had been working there for years. However, not long after, his father left the family, and his mother struggled to make ends meet (Amend, 95). In an interview with Maya Jaggi for *The Independent* Díaz explains: “My father was a trigamist; he supported three families. We were never not poor” (Díaz in Jaggi 2008). When Díaz came to the United States he only spoke Spanish and had to learn English. This he describes as a “violent experience” since he in addition to Standard English had to manage a variety of vernaculars, a task comic books helped him accomplish: “comic books, fantasy and science fiction are like a very vibrant, alive, and *very* American language” (Díaz in Celayo & Shook 2008, 14). According to himself, Díaz barely made it through high school (Díaz in Céspedes & Torres-Saillant 2000, 894), but later he attended both Kean College and Rutgers University. He got a full scholarship and went to Graduate school at Cornell University, where he obtained a Master of fine arts degree in Creative Writing. Díaz ascribes his successful education to luck, and claims that his prosperity was possible because of the size of the United States: “We have a very big country here. And when a country is very big, some weird permutations happen [...] So, a freak accident bused me into a good school system and turned into all these different things” (Díaz in Céspedes & Torres-Saillant 2000, 893).

It was while he was in college that Díaz, who was planning to become a teacher, realized that he wanted to be a writer (Díaz in Céspedes & Torres-Saillant 2000, 894). His breakthrough came when his debut collection of short fiction, *Drown*, was published in 1996. In *Drown* the different short stories “narrate several episodes in the life of Yunior, a boy who

grows up in impoverished barrios of the Dominican Republic and later in the inner cities of industrial New Jersey” (Maríñes). Literary professor Sophia Maríñes regards the collection as “visibly autobiographical,” as Yunió’s biography is remarkably similar to Díaz’ own:

The stories “Ysrael,” “Aguantando,” and “No Face” are set in the Dominican Republic, where little Yunió, his brother Rafa, and their mother Virta struggle with poverty and separation from her husband, who has migrated to the United States. “Drown,” “Edison, New Jersey,” and the other stories are set in the United States and portray different stages of Yunió’s coming of age in the claustrophobic atmosphere of an industrial neighborhood, where life seems doomed and hopeless (Maríñes).

Díaz himself confirms this assessment in “Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema,” an interview with Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, where he reveals that he does play with autobiography in *Drown*. He claims, however, that “no matter how hard I try to be autobiographical, the demands of fiction transform the material. There was no possible way to be autobiographical” (905).

After *Drown*, Díaz was working on a novel “about a psychic terrorist destroying New York” (Jaggi, 2008). However, after the events of September 11, 2001 he chose to abandon this project (Jaggi 2008). His next piece of fiction to be published was therefore *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*¹ which came out in 2007. The novel was well received and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008 (Amend, 95). It tells the story of “Ghetto nerd” Oscar De León who lives with his Dominican family in New Jersey. Like in *Drown* the novel treats issues related to the Dominican immigrant experience.

In both *Drown* and *Oscar Wao* Díaz makes use of Spanish in the text, a manoeuvre that intentionally complicates the reading: “The opaqueness of some of the language is the

¹ All references are from now on to this edition: Díaz, Junot. 2009. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. London: Faber and Faber, and will be referred to as *Oscar Wao*.

point; confusion is part of the game” (Díaz in Jaggi 2008). In “Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema” he explains that to make use of Spanish “without the benefits of italics or quotation marks” is a political move, pointing to the fact that Spanish is not a minority language: “Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why ‘other’ it?” (904). By integrating Spanish in a predominantly English text Díaz wants to remind readers of the fluidity of language, aiming “to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English” (904). His agenda is however not only political, but personal as well. He explains that, “by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English” (904).

According to Jaggi, Díaz’ use of Spanish has often pegged him as a Latino author in the United States, but his background is more complex. He describes it himself as follows: “African diasporic, migrant, Caribbean, Dominican, Jersey boy – these are my building blocks [...] It’s more an interlocking chain than any one point” (Díaz in Jaggi 2008). Although Díaz has spent most of his life in the United States his sense of ethnic identity is very strong: “I definitely would never try to pass for an island person. But I know that I’m Dominican. In this country that’s what you’re called if you are not called other things first” (Díaz in Céspedes & Torres-Saillant 2000, 896). As mentioned, his background as an immigrant is also reflected in *Oscar Wao*, and his experiences with learning languages lead him to drawing on genres like the comic book in the narrative. He explains how they relate to his own experience as follows:

[E]very time I tried to use a narrative to take me from here to there, it disintegrated, as soon as it reached that – I don’t know how to call it – that world barrier. But science fiction, fantasy and comic books are *meant* to do this kind of stupid stuff, they’re meant to talk about these

extreme, ludicrous transformations, and so I really wanted to use them (Díaz in Celayo & Shook 2008, 15).

By using these genres Díaz is able to portray the confusion of the immigrant experience, as they transcend, and make sense of, what is considered normal. In addition to these genres Díaz also brings in textual fragments from other, highly regarded literary works. Thus he merges fragments from what is considered “high” and “low” art forms into the narrative, engaging them in an intertextual dialogue. In *Oscar Wao* he further complicates the narrative by, among other things, adding sub-plots and allowing the narrative to move in time and between places.

Due to this narrative complexity, I will in this introductory chapter provide a rather elaborate summary of the novel in order to discuss the text more freely in detail throughout the chapters that follow. Following the overview of the narrative, I will turn to a preliminary discussion of diaspora in more general terms, since it is diaspora that in many ways frames Oscar Wao’s story.

The Life and Death of Oscar Wao

Oscar Wao is at first glance constructed as a nonlinear recollection of the family history of the De León-Cabral family. As the title indicates the novel tells the story of Oscar “Wao” de León’s brief life, but in addition to Oscar himself, it follows members of his family: his grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, his mother Hypatía Belicia “Beli” Cabral, and his sister Dolores “Lola” de León, spanning the period from the 1940’s to the 1990’s. However, when examining the novel more closely it appears to be two parallel stories that are told: the story of Oscar that moves forward in time, and the story of his family that is moving backwards in time. The two different timelines are intertwined, thus making the story seem non-linear. The

past and the present are juxtaposed, and as a result fragments of the past that are important to the present are revealed as we are following the story of Oscar.

Oscar Wao is narrated through the eyes of Yunió, a sometimes friend and sometimes boyfriend of Oscar's older sister Lola. The novel begins with an introductory chapter where Yunió introduces the fukú, an Old world curse which becomes one of the dominant tropes of the novel, as he claims that Oscar's story is a fukú story. Alongside the history of the fukú, historical "facts" of the Dominican Republic are presented in elaborate footnotes: "[f]or those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (2). The use of footnotes continues throughout the novel.

The novel is divided into three major parts that are in turn divided into chapters and sub-chapters. In Part I, chapters one, "Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World, 1974-1987," and four, "Sentimental Education, 1988-1992" are devoted to Oscar's story. Chapter one begins with a portrayal of Oscar as a child growing up in New Jersey. According to Yunió, he is not a typical representative of the Dominican male, and did not have any luck with the females except for an early period in his life when he was "something of a Casanova" (11). His luck with women runs out at age seven and "his life start[s] going down the tubes" (16).

During his adolescence Oscar grows increasingly obese, and high school is a source of endless anguish to him, and eventually he becomes a "social introvert" (22). Yunió describes how he seeks refuge in comic books, science fiction, role-playing games, and other similar genres of self-transformation. Unlike Yunió, who is able to hide his "otakuness"², Oscar wears "his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21). Despite his social awkwardness and his lack of luck with girls, Oscar falls in love easily and deeply, and has secret loves all over his

² "An obsessive interest for something, particularly anime or manga." <<http://www.wordnik.com/words/otaku>>

hometown of Paterson, New Jersey. His affections break his heart every day, which makes his self-confidence hit rock bottom. At the end of high school he “trie[s] to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness,” proclaiming that he is embarking on a new cycle of his life (30).

In chapter two “Wildwood, 1982-1985,” the point of view changes and now Lola narrates events from her adolescence. The first four pages of the chapter are written in italics and seem to be a stream-of-consciousness where Lola contemplates on how “[i]t’s never the changes we want that change everything” (51). For Lola, everything changes from the moment her mother calls her into the bathroom to examine her breasts. She is twelve years old at the time, and has so far been the perfect daughter, but with her mother’s cancer she feels a wildness growing within her. She describes how tense her relationship with her mother becomes: “She was my Old World Dominican mother and I was her only daughter, the one she had raised up herself with the help of nobody, which meant it was her duty to keep me crushed under her heel” (55). Lola longs for freedom and independence, and finally runs away to live with her boyfriend Aldo. In retrospect she states that “[i]t was like the stupidest thing I ever did. I was miserable. And so bored. But of course I wouldn’t admit it. I had run away, so I was happy! Happy!” (64). After a couple of months she calls Oscar, who comes to see her. Without her knowing it he brings their mother and aunt, who force Lola to come home with them. As punishment she is sent to live with her “grandmother,” La Inca, in Santo Domingo. However, the stay turns out to be a positive experience for Lola.

In chapter three the story moves back in time, and in “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral, 1955-1962,” Yunior narrates the story of Belicia’s life in the Dominican Republic before she immigrates to the United States. Her personal story is given much space, as it turns out to be the reason why the family now live in the United States. The chapter opens with a description of how Belicia and her “mother-aunt” (78) La Inca live together in

Baní in the Dominican Republic. It is the “Beautiful Days” that followed a dark period of Belicia’s life which they never spoke about. Belicia “had it *made*,” but still “she wanted, with all her heart, something *else*” (79). She knows what she wants to escape from, but not where she wants to escape to. Yuniór puts her restlessness in a broader perspective when he says that:

[S]he was suffering the same suffocation that was asphyxiating a whole generation of young Dominicans. Twenty-odd years of the Trujillato³ had guaranteed that. Hers was the generation that would launch the Revolution, but which for the moment was turning blue for want of air (80-81).

At home La Inca constantly reminds Belicia about her family’s Glorious Golden Past, in which the readers know very little about at this point in the novel. Belicia herself, however, has her feet “[p]ointed to the future” (81).

Through the description of Belicia as a teenager in the Dominican Republic, it becomes apparent that both her children have inherited different qualities from her. Lola has the same desire to escape New Jersey that Belicia has to escape the Dominican Republic, and Oscar’s ability to fall quickly in love comes from his mother who we learn is “straight boycrazy” (88). Belicia is a beautiful girl with an immense sexual appeal who, unlike her son, enjoys attention from the opposite sex. She spends her school days dreaming about the various boys around her, and one of them becomes her first love and heartbreak. Jack Pujols is the whitest boy in school and the son of a colonel loyal to the Trujillato. Pujols convinces Belicia that they are going to marry after high school, but as she is beneath his class, the relationship never amounts to anything other than sex. It becomes quite the scandal when they are finally caught.

³ The “Trujillato” refers to the period from 1930-1961 when the dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina ruled the Dominican Republic. I will return to Trujillo later.

After the scandal Belicia refuses to go back to school and gets a job as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. As a result her relationship with La Inca grows tense. It does not improve when a new waitress at the restaurant introduces Belicia to Bani's night life, and she starts to stay out at all hours. It is in the night club "El Hollywood" Belicia meets her second love: The Gangster. Yunior describes their relationship as follows: "Beli in love! Round two! But unlike what happened with Pujols, this was the real deal: pure uncut unadulterated love, the Holy Grail that would so bedevil her children throughout their lives" (125-26). Their affair is quite passionate and Belicia becomes pregnant. However, as it turns out that the Gangster is married, and to no other than Trujillo's sister, happiness does not last for Belicia. She is confronted by the Gangster's wife, and lead off by members of the secret police to have an abortion. She is saved at the last minute by the Chinese men she works for, but unfortunately picked up by the secret police a couple of hours later. When La Inca finds out what has happened, she, Yunior tells us, "knew in her ironclad heart that the girl was funtoosh, that the Doom of the Cabral had managed to infiltrate her circle at last" (143-44). Not knowing what else to do, she starts to pray for her daughter's life.

At the same time the policemen drive Belicia to a sugarcane field outside of Bani where they give her a beating she barely survives. Here we arrive at what Yunior names "the strangest part of our tale" (149). A mongoose appears before Belicia, places its paws on her chest. It tells her that her baby is dead, but that she has to survive for the son and the daughter who await. The mongoose guides her out of the cane field, and saves her life. La Inca, however, is convinced that it was God she met.

It later turns out that Trujillo himself is killed the same night Belicia was kidnapped, but he was too powerful to be dispelled easily: "Even after his death his evil *lingered*" (156). La Inca decides that it is not safe for Belicia to stay in the Dominican Republic, and sends her to New York. Belicia laughs at the idea, which makes Yunior exclaim: "Oh, Beli; not so

rashly, not so rashly: What did you know about states or diaspora? What did you know about Nueva Yol or unheated ‘old law’ tenements or children whose self-hate short-circuited their minds? What did you know, madame, about *immigration?*” (160). The chapter ends with Belicia’s flight to New York, where she is sitting next to the man that “would end up being her husband and the father of her two children, that after two years together he would leave her, her third and final heartbreak, and she would never love again” (164).

In chapter four “Sentimental Education, 1988-1992,” the story picks up where it left off in chapter one. Yunior begins the chapter by explaining how Lola takes care of him after he has been beaten up on his way home one night. In his own words she “sewed my balls back on” (168), so when Oscar suffers from depression in his college sophomore year, Yunior repays the favour and agrees to live with him. It quickly becomes apparent to Yunior that Oscar is not like any other Dominicans he knows: a fat nerd who claims he is cursed. Still, they get on well until Yunior makes it his project to change Oscar. Oscar goes along with it for a while, but when he tires of Yunior’s exercise and diet regimen they end up having a fight, after which they merely coexist. Yunior stops protecting Oscar, who again becomes an easy target for fellow students’ comments. This is also how he gets his nickname. For Halloween he dresses up as Doctor Who, but, Yunior tells us:

I couldn’t believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién is Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey, Wao, what you doing? Wao, you want to get your feet off my chair? And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks dude started *answering* to it (180).

Later the same year Oscar falls in love with Jenni Muños, a Puerto Rican “goth.” He chases her for a while, hits on her every chance he gets, until, to everybody’s great surprise, she actually starts to hang out with him. But it does not last. Jenni gets a boyfriend, and Oscar’s

heart is broken again. This time he becomes really depressed, and after Yuniór tells him that he is moving out, he gets drunk and jumps off the New Brunswick train bridge. He survives and later reveals that, while standing on the bridge, he encountered a Golden Mongoose like his mother (unbeknownst to Oscar) did years before. When Yuniór visits him, he claims the curse made him jump.

Part II of *Oscar Wao* is devoted to events taking place in the Dominican Republic. It opens with an untitled introduction of how Lola is forced to go back to the United States after her stay with La Inca. Following this introduction, the story moves further back in time, and in chapter five, "Poor Abelard, 1944-1946," the story of Oscar and Lola's grandfather Abelard and the beginning of the Doom of the Cabral is told. Abelard is a respected doctor, husband of Socorro, who was also his nurse, and father of three daughters: Jacquelyn, Astrid and Belicia. During the Trujillato, he does what is necessary in order to stay on Trujillo's good side. He and his wife participate in every medical mission Trujillo organizes, and when banquets are held in Trujillo's honour Abelard always attends. Yuniór explains: "He arrived early, left late, smiled endlessly, and *didn't say nothing*" (215). But when Trujillo takes an interest in his oldest daughter, he does not know what to do, and ends up doing nothing. A nervous wreck, he struggles to keep up appearances. During a visit to Santiago he agrees to have a drink with some "buddies." This proves to be fateful, as it is this evening he is reported to have said the Bad Thing about Trujillo: a joke of disputed content, that triggers the prosecution from Trujillo, and as a result a fukú is unleashed on the family: the Doom of the Cabral. Within a couple of years, Belicia is the sole survivor of Abelard's family. However, she spends the first nine years of her life living as a bought slave for a family in outer Azua before La Inca, Abelard's cousin, rescues her and raises her like her own daughter. These are the years of Belicia's childhood that throughout the novel are referred to as the Lost Years.

In chapter six, “Land of the Lost, 1992-1995,” the narrative again jumps in time. The De León-Cabral family spends the summer after Oscar’s failed suicide attempt with La Inca in Santo Domingo. During his stay Oscar falls in love with Ybón Pimentel, a “semiretired puta” (279). Ybón is La Inca’s neighbour, and the first woman to ever initiate a conversation with Oscar. She invites Oscar in for a drink, and they talk for hours. Yuniór describes how lovesick he becomes, and how he starts to visit her every day. She does not hide the fact that she is seeing other men, and that one of them is a police officer, but Oscar represses the fact that she is not his. At the end of summer Ybón begins talking more about the Capitán, her “jealous Third World cop boyfriend” (291), who wants to meet Oscar. Their first encounter ends up with Oscar getting beaten up and driven to the cane fields by two policemen. On their way into the field Oscar has an overwhelming feeling that he has been there before (298). As we know by this point in the novel, it is not Oscar, but his mother who has been there before. And like her, Oscar survives, again with the help of something perhaps magical, or divine. During Oscar’s recovery Yuniór remarks that “if they [La Inca and Belicia] noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it” (301), but still they agree that Oscar has to go back to the United States as soon as possible.

Part III opens with an untitled introduction where Oscar visits Yuniór in his apartment in Washington Heights to borrow money from him. Then in chapter seven, “The Final Voyage,” Yuniór describes Oscar’s trip back to the Dominican Republic where he spends his last days chasing Ybón. When he is asked why he has returned he proclaims: “It is the ancient powers [...] they won’t leave me alone” (315). He spends twenty-seven days courting Ybón, all the while being threatened by the Capitán, but in the end she reciprocates his affections. However, the expected happens. The two policemen bring him into the cane fields again, but this time he does not survive.

The final chapter of the novel is an untitled chapter where Yuniór contemplates on the events following Oscar's death, on the future, and on how Lola's daughter Isis also at one point will learn about the family curse. The novel ends with a chapter named "The Final Letter," where Yuniór reveals that Oscar had sent several letters home before he died. The final letter arrived eight months after his death, and in it he discloses that he and Ybón had spent a weekend away just the two of them, where he finally had lost his virginity: "So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (335).

Diaspora and its Presences

Thus the story moves back and forth in time and place throughout the novel. Partly set in the United States and partly in the Dominican Republic, the novel displays the relationship between the Old and the New World both as geographical places and as representatives of the past and the present. Historically the Dominican Republic is a part of the New World, discovered by Christopher Columbus and a subject of colonization, but due to vast emigration, it is also regarded as the Old World in relation to the United States. Dominican communities in the United States are often identified as diasporas, and this is the cultural framework we encounter in *Oscar Wao*.

The term diaspora is explicitly referred to in the novel, and holds a special place thematically. It becomes one of the novel's dominant tropes as the challenges the characters face are coloured by the diaspora, interspersing the issues of the immigrant experience that are so central in the novel.

However, the diaspora portrayed in *Oscar Wao* is quite different from what is typically named diaspora. In his book *Global Diasporas. An Introduction*, Robin Cohen gives an

overview of the traditional meaning of the term: the word “diaspora” is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over). When the ancient Greeks applied it in relation to humans, they thought of diaspora as migration and colonization (ix) and employed the term with positive connotations. Later it was “hijacked” (25) to describe the Jewish communities dispersed around the world after being forced out of Palestine (modern Palestine and Israel). Cohen describes the Jewish diaspora, and other similar diasporas, as “signif[ying] a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile” (ix). The term consequently came to signify a negative experience. Over time the meaning of the term has shifted, and contemporary uses of diaspora cover a wider range of experiences. Although Cohen stresses that “all scholars of diaspora recognize that the Jewish tradition is at the heart of any definition of the concept” (21), and Monika Fludernik characterises the Jewish diaspora as the prototype of diasporas (xxv), scholars do not agree on a set definition of the term. In relation to this, Fludernik consequently describes diaspora as a “referent [that] seems to resist precise definition” (xi).

Some critics, like Ruben Gowricharn, insist on keeping the element of force as a feature of the diasporic experience. According to Gowricharn, “[t]he concept of diaspora refers to the forcible dispersion of a people. This element of force distinguishes diasporas from other forms of international migration” (3). His description is suitable for the traditional experience like the African diaspora in Columbus’s New World. The African diaspora has been and is a strong presence in the Caribbean, and is related to the Jewish diaspora in that they are both examples of what Cohen calls victim diasporas, i.e. dispersed people forced to migrate. However, Cohen stresses that in today’s explorations of diaspora it is important to transcend the Jewish tradition, even though it often provides the point of comparison for other victim diasporas (31). This is because “the word diaspora is now being used, whether purists

approve or not, in a variety of new, but interesting and suggestive contexts” (21). Most of these do not emphasise the element of force.

An example of one such new and interesting context is illustrated in Wenche Ommundsen’s essay “Have Culture, Will Travel,” where she suggests new ways to look at diaspora. In relation to diasporic, transnational, and transcultural populations she sets out to demonstrate how

a cultural approach to notions of citizenship invites an examination of the play of identities, masks and performed selves in which individuals as well as groups must engage, and, beyond that, a reappraisal of the imagined communities (national or supranational) to which they owe their allegiance (3).

With this, Ommundsen points to the fact that we can examine how such different populations adapt to the society they live in by taking a closer look at their cultural citizenship, namely the compatibility between the cultural attributes of a community and the country in which they live (5). This becomes a complex matter, as the relationship between culture and citizenship has become quite intricate, particularly in multicultural countries. To demonstrate this, Ommundsen conducts an experiment which she calls an “airport fiction.” Here she imagines three different airports representing different ways of dealing with, in her example, the Chinese diaspora. With this “airport fiction” she removes some of the abstractness from the term “diaspora.” By taking Chinese people abroad as a concrete example, she demonstrates how the different approaches to diaspora are also affecting individuals, and not only groups. She indicates that “we are dealing here with both individuals and communities whose cultural characteristics are never fixed but always mobile, multifaceted and contested” (15). And as the cultural character of the communities changes, so does the diaspora. Thus we can say that every diaspora is unique.

Returning to Cohen, one of the new contexts of diaspora he points to involves how minorities with strong collective identities have identified themselves as diasporas differently from the original description. This kind of identification resembles both Ommundsen's way of looking at Chinese diaspora, and the diaspora in *Oscar Wao*. These groups have not been active agents of colonization, nor passive victims of persecution like the traditional diasporas were (ix). The element of force is absent⁴, which leads Cohen to propose different categories of diasporas; victim, labour, trade, imperial, and cultural diasporas respectively. To illustrate the categories, he uses various, well known diasporas as examples: in addition to the Jewish, he also refers to the African and Armenian diasporas as examples of victim diasporas; to Indian diaspora as labour diaspora; to Chinese diaspora as trade; the British as imperial⁵; and the Caribbean as cultural diaspora. It is however problematic to subsume the Caribbean into one, single cultural identity and thus talk about a common Caribbean cultural identity. The different Caribbean countries were colonized by different European countries, and it is therefore a region today where the results of encounters between these colonizers and the original population coexist. The difference of origins and encounters create differences between national, cultural identities within the region. However, for my purpose here, as *Oscar Wao* deals with people from the Dominican Republic my emphasis will be on the Dominican cultural identity as an aspect of a Dominican cultural diaspora in the United States.

Cohen also presents a list of common features of diasporations: “dispersal from an original homeland,” either traumatically, in search of work, or “in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;” “a collective memory and myth about the homeland;” “an idealization of

⁴ Although the element of force executed by other people is no longer relevant, natural and man-made disasters may force people into migration, e.g. Haiti. When left with nothing, the issue of *choice* is questionable.

⁵ It is not relevant for this thesis to engage in an elaborate debate on Cohen's classification of diaspora. Still it is necessary to note that I find the label “Imperial diaspora” problematic. Although I previously have stated that the element of force is absent in later meanings of the diaspora, if we accept that the British colonizing powers were living in a diaspora, one could almost name anything a diaspora. It would become very difficult to draw a line between a diaspora and something else, like regular immigration.

the putative ancestral home;” wish for return to the home country; “a strong ethnic group consciousness;” “a troubled relationship with host societies;” “a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement;” and “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (26). When using the features mentioned above in categorizing different diasporas, Cohen focuses on the most prominent ones. We see an example of this in relation to the African diaspora, where he states that,

They are, above all, victim diasporas in their historical experience. This does not mean that they do not share several or all of the other nine characteristics I have placed in my consolidated list, merely that their victim origin is either self-affirmed or accepted by outside observers as determining their essential character (28).

The African diaspora has been and continues to be a strong presence in the Caribbean, and Caribbean cultures. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall is preoccupied with the African diaspora as one of the founding elements of Caribbean cultural identity. He borrows Aimee Césaire’s and Léopold Senghor’s metaphor of three different “presences” which the Caribbean cultural identities can be related to: *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Européenne* and *Presence Américain*. The African diaspora falls in under *Presence Africaine*, and is the site of the repressed (Hall 1996 230). The slaves brought from Africa to the Caribbean could not practise their African customs and traditions freely. Still, according to Hall, they kept their African culture alive in everyday life in their language, the stories and tales told to children, in religious practices and beliefs, spiritual life, and arts and crafts:

Africa, the signified which could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken, unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture. It is ‘hiding’ behind every verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life. It is the secret code with which

every Western text was 're-read'. It is the ground-bass of every rhythm and bodily movement.

This was – is – the 'Africa' that 'is alive and well in the diaspora' (230).

Together with *Presence Europeenne* and *Presence Americain*, *Presence Africaine* has contributed to shape the Caribbean way of looking at the world. The presences also play an important part in the diaspora, as the dispersed people carry them with them in their cultural baggage.

The three presences also play an important part as the ground pillars of the Dominican culture of the diaspora in *Oscar Wao*. They become defining factors that filter into the way the characters relate to notions of home, to their own sense of identity, to each other, and to past and present. All of these issues are problematized 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 not recognized as fully Dominican nor as fully American. Hence, the characters in Diaz' fiction as well as members of the real world diaspora obtain a position in-between the cultures of their native country and their host country. This ambiguous position becomes further complicated by the simultaneous existence of the old and new world, and influences how people of diaspora and the characters in the novel manoeuvre in their own worlds. The ways in which diaspora figures in *Oscar Wao* more specifically is one of the main emphases of the next chapter.

Chapter One:

Fukú and Diaspora in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

As emphasised in the Introduction, diaspora is a prominent trope in *Oscar Wao*. This chapter aims to explore the various ways it can be defined and how it relates to the novel. It also figures alongside the fukú, another of the novel's tropes which I will explore further before we return to diaspora. The narrator of the novel, Yunior, says the following about the fukú:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World (1).

These are the opening lines of *Oscar Wao*, and the description of how the fukú came to the Caribbean is the story of how the Europeans, by bringing slaves to the New World also brought with them an Old World phenomenon: a curse that would haunt the New World. Yunior describes it quite simply: “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (1). It is not only the natives of the Hispaniola that suffer under the curse; the fukú also struck the Europeans. It “attached” itself especially to Christopher Columbus, who through his “discovery” of the New World is in the novel held responsible for unleashing it on the island. His personal curse caused him to die “miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices” (1). This leads Yunior to appoint him both fukú’s “midwife and one of its great European victims” (1).

However, the fukú is not just ancient history. In *Oscar Wao* it is described as an important part of Dominican culture, both in the past and the present. It is thought to have been especially prominent in the Dominican Republic during “La Era de Trujillo:” “It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about” (2). In the fictitious space of the novel, the Dominicans are said to believe Trujillo had supernatural powers, and Yuniór links these powers directly to the fukú, as no one knows if he was the “Curse’s servant or its master,” however “them two was *tight*” (2-3). The Dominicans also believed that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a powerful fukú, on both themselves and their family. To validate this assertion, Yuniór brings up the Kennedy family as an example. The continual misfortunes of the Kennedys, where members of the family have died of unnatural causes, have by several been called the “Kennedy-Curse.” The narrator plays on this when he claims that John F. Kennedy “was the one who green-lighted the assassination of Trujillo in 1961” (3), and that he was killed as a direct result of this.

According to Yuniór, believing in the fukú is an old-school thing, and more widespread among the parental generation. A young Lola living with La Inca in the Dominican Republic dismisses it and describes it as a part of life: “That’s life for you. All the happiness you gather to yourself, it will sweep away like it’s nothing. If you ask me I don’t think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That’s enough” (205). But there are also young people who believe in the fukú, including Oscar himself: “I guess I should have fucking known. Dude used to say he was cursed, used to say this a lot, and if I’d really been old-school Dominican I would have a) listened to the idiot, and then b) run the other way” (171). Still, Yuniór remarks that it makes no difference if you believe in the fukú or not: “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” (5).

There is however a way to guard oneself and one's family from the fukú, as Yunió explains:

[T]raditionally in Santo Domingo anytime you mentioned or overheard the Admiral's⁶ name or anytime a fukú reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed by a vigorous crossing of index fingers).

Zafa (7).

As the summary in the Introduction reveals, the story of Oscar Wao is a fukú story, and Yunió contemplates whether his own narrative, the book itself, might be a zafa of sorts - his very own counterspell (7).

The nature of fukú is the theme of the Preface, and this emphasis sets the tone for the prominent role it will have. It is a dominant trope throughout the novel, as it represents a part of the Dominican cultural heritage the characters carry with them. It seemingly reveals the fate of the region, and its people, as somehow predetermined, and is portrayed both as something inevitable and as superstition. It is not clarified whether or not fukú is real, and Yunió plays with this ambiguity of the curse. He portrays events in a manner that makes it possible for readers to interpret them as caused by the fukú, or as natural consequences of the characters' actions. In the latter interpretation one might claim that the characters are hiding behind the fukú. It provides them with an excuse and an explanation for the unfortunate consequences of their own behaviour.

Despite the uncertainty of the validity of the fukú, it is one of the driving forces of *Oscar Wao*. In "Reassembling Fragments: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse,

⁶ In the novel Christopher Columbus is often referred to as the Admiral.

and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" Monica Hanna names the representation of the fukú in the novel "as engine of historical development from the Conquest to the present" (Hanna, 509). The same way the fukú was there from the very beginning of Dominican history, it is present in both the narrative and Oscar's story from the start. For the De León-Cabral family the story of the fukú and the curse begins already with Grandfather Abelard: "When the family talks about it at all – which is like never – they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (211). The "Bad Thing" is as described in the Introduction, a joke made by Abelard that leads to the prosecution from Trujillo and unleashes a fukú on the family: the "Doom of the Cabrals" (143). After which a series of unfortunate incidents strikes the family: Abelard is sent to prison, and his family told that he is dead. This leads his wife Socorro to kill herself when Belicia is only two months old. Her two sisters are placed with family, but both of them die within a couple of years of what appear to be accidents. Although Belicia is not yet born when her father goes to prison, the fact that she is born "*black black*" is taken as an "ill omen" (248). She is the "Child of the Apocalypse" (251), and turns out to be the sole survivor of the original Cabral family. However, having a darker complexion, the new-born Belicia is not as easy to place as her sisters. After being passed between distant relatives of her mother she is sold to complete strangers, "and subsequently lost from sight for a very long time" (253). After nine years La Inca, Abelard's cousin, gets word of where she is and saves her from the terrible, abusive family she is living with, or rather slaving for. Belicia never talks about these years, and Yunió even believes that she never thought about that life again, just "[e]mbraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands" (258-59). I will return to this amnesia later in this chapter.

In the novel the story of Belicia before she moves to the United States is given much space. Yunió tells us how La Inca cares for her like she was her own child: she "expect[s]

Beli to be the last best hope of her decimated family [...] [and] to play a key role in a historical rescue mission” (81). La Inca glorifies the Cabral family’s past, causing Belicia to feel trapped and restless. She does not care about the past: “Her feet pointed forward, she reminded La Inca over and over. Pointed to the future” (81). Her quest for something else, and her tendency to quickly fall in love as she is “*straight boycrazy*” (88), leads her into trouble. As we have seen, her affair with the Gangster is what ultimately leads to her having to leave the Dominican Republic, since he turns out to be Trujillo’s brother in law. During one of their discussions about the Gangster even La Inca wonders if Belicia might be cursed: “Maybe people are right, La Inca despaired. Maybe you are cursed. Beli laughed. You might be cursed, but not me” (128). Belicia chooses to ignore not only La Inca’s warnings, but also the warnings of the “man with no face.”

The “man with no face” is a recurring image in *Oscar Wao* that the readers first encounter through Belicia:

Beli didn’t know if it was the heat or the two beers she drank while the colmadero sent for his cousin or the skinned goat or dim memories of her Lost Years, but our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the holes *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed but before she could confirm it the pueblito vanished into the dust (135).

At this point in time Belicia is still happy with the Gangster, and naively believes that he is going to leave his wife for her. Her illusions are about to be broken, and the faceless man can be seen as a premonition of what is going to come. The next time she meets him is after having been confronted by the Gangster’s wife, Trujillo’s sister. She is having Belicia arrested and one of the policemen has no face: “there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn’t have a face*” (141).

Later in the novel we learn that the faceless man has also appeared to other family members. Before Abelard was imprisoned his wife started dreaming: “Socorro dreamed that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (237). Abelard dismisses her when she tries to tell him, choosing to ignore the premonition. Socorro’s dream indicates that the faceless man is not just coming for her husband but also their children, and as we see later the novel also his grandchildren, perhaps even his grandchildren’s children.

In “Reassembling Fragments” Hanna also suggests that the narration of history in *Oscar Wao* is cyclic (509). This is generally applicable to Oscar’s behaviour, particularly in relation to the events leading up to his death, as he repeats many of Belicia’s mistakes. Like Belicia Oscar also encounters the man with no face on several occasions. His first experience is strikingly similar to his mother’s: “there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face, but then the killers got back in the car and drove” (298). Oscar also imagines that the faceless man takes part in the beating that kills him: “there were moments Oscar was sure that he was being beaten by three men, not two, that the faceless man from in front of the colmado was joining them” (299). The “Doom of the Cabrals” catches up with him. Later, Yunior predicts that the faceless man’s haunting of the De León-Cabral family will continue. He talks about Lola’s daughter Isis, who for now is protected by his mother and La Inca, but “[o]ne day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man. Not now, but soon” (330).

Like the *fukú* itself the image of the faceless man is intangible. In *Oscar Wao* they are closely related, as the man appears before the characters as a premonition of events to come caused by the curse. In the example above he acts like an image of death. However, the

anonymity of his faceless-ness also has another dimension. In the Dominican Republic a traditional type of ceramic dolls are made that have no face. In *Merengue and Dominican Identity: Music as National Unifier* Julie Sellers remarks that “Dominicans are quick to explain that the dolls have no face because the Dominican as such have no single face – he or she is a mix of three⁷ cultures” (35). By not giving the dolls faces they do not rank the different ethnicities present in the Dominican Republic⁸. At the end of the novel Yuniór reports that he has dreams about Oscar, and in some of them he has no face (325). That Oscar himself is portrayed like this may be seen as a nod to the diversity the Dominican (dolls) represent.

Of course, Oscar’s cultural identity is even more complex, as he in addition to having a mixed Dominican background is influenced by the Western, American culture he lives in. Blanking out his face is perhaps a comment on how he is not one or the other, but both Dominican and American. Oscar’s doubleness is a result of him living in the United States, which returns us to the second, and related dominant trope in the novel, namely diaspora.

The notion of diaspora and the fukú are closely linked in *Oscar Wao*, and Yuniór explains the relationship between them as follows: “My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo’s payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú” (5). Diaspora is explicitly referred to in the novel, and like the fukú, holds a special place thematically both on a historical, global level and on a local level. The role of the Dominican Republic has changed from being a part of the New World, to, in more recent decades, being regarded as a part of the Old World in relation to the United States. Taking place partly in the United States and partly in the Dominican Republic, the novel thus displays the relationship between the Old and the New World both as geographical places and as representatives of the past and the

⁷ The three cultures Sellers here refers to are the Taino, African and European cultures.

⁸ However, Sellers remarks that the dolls’ skin “is always a bronze color reminiscent of the Taíno and never black” (35).

present. I aim to explore this relationship with an emphasis on these coordinates as generating modes in a diasporic world view.

As discussed in the introduction, diaspora is a “referent [that] seems to resist precise definition” (Fludernik, xi). The diasporas present in Columbus’s New World, such as the African one, fits the traditional definition of diaspora, while contemporary uses of the term covers a wider range of experiences. Through her “airport fiction,” Wenche Ommundsen suggests that we perceive diaspora slightly differently. By examining how diasporic, transnational, and transcultural populations adapt to the society they live in, and by looking at the compatibility between the cultural attributes of a community and the country they come to, she shows how different approaches to diaspora are affecting individuals and not just diasporic populations as groups. The experience of living in a diaspora will vary from community to community, and from individual to individual. This is true also for the characters in *Oscar Wao* and this, as well as the particularities of the Dominican diaspora will be explored further later in this chapter.

In her essay “The Modern to Late Modern Period in the Caribbean Diaspora,” Michele Reis takes a closer look at what makes the Caribbean diasporas, including the Dominican, special. She, too, refers to Stuart Hall, who believes that it is because it is “twice diasporised,” meaning that it is both “a point of departure and arrival simultaneously” (Reis, 47). This leads us to the conception of the Caribbean, and thus the Dominican Republic, as both a part of the Old and the New World. In the first diasporisation the Caribbean was the point of arrival in the New World and “harboured diasporic groups from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East” (Reis, 47), and is, as Hall says, the place “where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West” (1996, 234). Hall therefore claims that the Caribbean “is itself the beginning of diaspora” (1996, 235). This diaspora experience is defined

by recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall 1996, 235).

In the Caribbean, the presence of dispersed communities has been important in constructing the “Caribbean,” as meetings between different cultures have resulted in the emergence of mixed cultural identities. In *Oscar Wao* the fukú is a (fictional) example of an element that can be traced back to the original cultures, and linked to African spirituality through the mixed Dominican culture.

In the second diasporisation, which Yunió claims to be triggered by Trujillo, the Caribbean acts as departure point in the Old World for people who constitute the dispersed communities in the United States. The United States now becomes the New World, and as the Old and the New World exist simultaneously, they also change simultaneously. External factors and influences make the cultures in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora develop differently, consequently creating a gap between the memory of the native land, the idealized past, and the present reality. This is also apparent in *Oscar Wao*. When the De León-Cabral family return to the Dominican Republic they find many things unchanged but “it also seemed in many places like a whole new country was materializing atop the ruins of the old one” (273). A more powerful manifestation of this complex can, however, be found in the novel’s intertextuality, which I come to in the next chapter.

As mentioned, contemporary discourses of and on diaspora show that the term has come to cover a range of meanings. Anjali Prabhu’s close linking of diaspora to “creolization” provides an understanding of the term that is useful in relation to the diaspora portrayed in *Oscar Wao*. In *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects*, Prabhu suggests

that diaspora and creolization are different, “specific versions of hybridity that can presuppose and engender” (3) comparatively different politics. She describes creolization as follows:

Creolization, when viewed as a theoretical formulation postdiaspora, is tuned in to the present of diasporic populations away from the homeland. It addresses their concerns about advancements without blind assimilation but rather by preserving difference, allying around particular causes, connecting with the motherland in a way that is practical and practicable, and connecting with other diasporics. (Prabhu, 4)

In *Oscar Wao* such concerns about advancements is most apparent in relation to Lola, who is the character that is most preoccupied with the politics of identity. She identifies with other minority groups and “knew just about anybody with any pigment, had her hand on every protest and any march” (50). As she connects with other diasporas, allying with them, she actively uses her background as an asset to get ahead. Yuniior describes her as “[o]ne of those overachiever chicks who run all the organizations in college and wear suits to meetings” (168). Although she has a strong connection to the Dominican, her focus lies on the life she leads in the United States.

Prabhu’s description of creolization furthermore resembles a sentiment found in the Caribbean cultural diasporas in the United States, a label suggested by Cohen who claims that the strong cultural identities of the Caribbean people make them identify themselves as diasporas differently from the original description (x). Due to the changing pattern of migration, as migrants travel back and forth between their native and host country, we are dealing with transnational communities where especially young people’s “initial socialization has taken place within the cross-currents of more than one cultural field, and whose ongoing forms of cultural expression and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretized and elaborated from more than one cultural heritage” (Cohen, 128). According to Cohen, they

adopt elements of their host country's culture, but the strong Caribbean cultural identities remain the most prominent.

In light of such challenges Prabhu proposes to rename "diaspora" in order for the term to correspond with contemporary lives lived in it:

[W]e can identify in theoretical and political discourses dealing with the idea of minority constituencies, various changes that transform diaspora into creolization. This has to do with diaspora discourse having to encounter and accommodate itself to other experiences of minority status or new immigrations. It has to do with different generations having to maneuver their desires within the framework of this diaspora. It also has to do with the need for mobility in the new setting and the opportunities that are not equally available across this population for numerous reasons (4).

Although she renames diaspora, Prabhu's understanding of the term comes close to those of Hall and Ommundsen. It reflects how the term has become applicable to more than the traditional experience. However, it is precisely the widened use of diaspora to encompass and overlap with experiences described by other terms which is the reason Prabhu renames it. She regards the term creolization⁹ to be a more suitable basis for examining contemporary diasporic communities in the United States like the Dominican discussed here. Hence, by comparing them to bourgeois and communist societies, Prabhu divides Old and New World diasporas into diaspora and creolization:

The Communist Manifesto claims that the bourgeois society is dominated by the past while in communist society the present dominates the past (Marx and Engels 485). Similarly, a dialectic between diaspora and creolization is identifiable with diasporic discourses relying on a past trauma that justifies a present affiliation and solidarity, whereas creolizing discourses,

⁹ Creolization as a term has existed for a long time. It typically refers to the processes where new cultural forms emerge through the encounter of different cultures in the New World (Buisseret, 5-6).

even if not concerned with an actual erasure of the past trauma, direct their energies toward interaction and new connections in the present (5).

In relation to Prabhu's definition Belicia, who relies on her past trauma, represents a diasporic discourse. She experiences life in the United States as living in a traditional diaspora. Her children on the other hand, direct their energies towards interaction and new connections in the present and can thus be seen as representatives of a creolizing discourse. This opens for the possibility that Oscar and Lola might not be living in a diaspora at all. I will return to this later in this chapter.

However, not everyone agrees that the Caribbean experiences can be defined as diaspora experiences. Along with terms such as border, travel, creolization, transculturation, and hybridity, James Clifford names the term diaspora as one more concept trying to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures, and religions (303). Like other theorists, Clifford also points out that the term now has several meanings, and in his essay "Diaspora" sets out to sort and specify these. In his attempt at clarification, Clifford refers to William Safran's defining model where a community has to fulfil certain criteria to be recognized as a diaspora. Safran's model resembles Cohen's model that we looked at in the introduction, but Clifford expresses hesitation towards such criteria-based definitions, noting that "[w]hatever the working list of diasporic features, no society can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history. And the discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted" (306). He points out that not even the Jewish diaspora, which is considered to be the prototype, manages to fulfil all of the criteria (305). This causes groups to be defined as "more or less diasporic, having only two, or three, or four of the basic six features" (306). Clifford also points out that according to Safran the Caribbean diaspora, among others, are "histories of displacement that fall into the category of quasi diasporas, showing only some diasporic features" (306). However, as Junot Díaz himself names the

community he grew up in a Dominican diaspora (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams), and diaspora is explicitly referred to throughout *Oscar Wao* I will continue to use this label in further explorations.

The immigrant experience portrayed in *Oscar Wao* is not exclusive to this particular novel. It is based in reality and like in *Drown* we find elements in *Oscar Wao* that resemble experiences from Junot Díaz' own life. Issues treated in *Oscar Wao* are also treated in works by other Dominican-American authors who share this cultural background and thus face similar problems in the United States. In his article "Dominican-American Writers: Hybridity and Ambivalence," Fernando Valerio-Holguín remarks that US-Dominican writers are not newcomers to the American literary scene. Many of them were born in the United States or like Junot Díaz immigrated as children with their families (1). Valerio-Holguín thus argues that "[t]he importance of Dominican immigration to the United States has mainly appeared in Dominican-American literature, where in one manner or another, the Dominican and/or Dominican-American cultural identity is represented" (Valerio-Holguín, 1). This is evident in *Oscar Wao*, where Díaz deals with Dominican culture both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States, and relates both to the characters' cultural identities. He, like other Dominican-American writers, is positioned in a hybrid space that is created at the intersection between the cultures of their native and adopted countries. This space is equivalent to what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space:" a privileged space that allows the authors to change positions as subjects (Valerio-Holguín, 15). They move between two or more cultures writing across the boundaries, not trapped in one culture, but balancing the centres of two. Thus, according to Valerio-Holguín, "hybrid US/Dominican writers," like Díaz, "can be considered as that which is 'neither the one nor the other'" or as representatives of the "One-and-a-Half Generation" (Valerio-Holguín, 2). What this entails is that they,

more than adult immigrants who seek to reaffirm themselves by identification with their original culture through time, or the first generation which completely assimilates to the host country's culture, *Generation 1.5* is the one capable of negotiating both cultures and shape what he [Gustavo Pérez-Firmat] calls a hyphenated culture (Valerio-Holguín, 2).

Junot Díaz is a representative of *Generation 1.5* that contributes in the shaping of the hyphenated Dominican-American culture. Being in such an in-between position can be difficult and unstable, as Díaz indeed suggests: “I always lived in a situation of simultaneity. It's like a science fiction book where an alien or creature or an artefact exists on two worlds, or on two different planes at one time. They're not fixed in one place. They phase in and out” (Díaz in Valerio-Holguín, 8). However, balancing two cultures becomes difficult in the long run: “The balance of life in the hyphen, of life in the in-between, is broken and the scale tilts toward the hegemonic language and culture. In this way, Homi Bhabha's ‘neither one nor the other’ becomes rather ‘one more than the other’” (Valerio-Holguín, 15). This is reflected in novels like *Oscar Wao* that deal with existing in and between two cultures: The final product will bear traces of both, but likely one more than the other.

In *Oscar Wao* direct references to diaspora are frequently related to Belicia. Her migration takes place during Trujillo's reign because, as Yunior reports, the Gangster stole her heart and “catapulted her and hers into Diaspora” (115). She settles down in Paterson, New Jersey where Oscar and Lola grew up, and is described as the “Old World Dominican mother” (55) and the “Empress of Diaspora” (106). She acts as the keeper of true “Dominican-ness,” and in this manner she resembles the women in Díaz' own life, whom he describes in an interview with *The Progressive* as follows,

And the final thing is diaspora: We all got held together. I was very clear growing up the only reason this shit worked—what we called the Dominican diaspora—is because of these crazy

women characters, women like my mom, and their collective knowledge of survival. (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams)

In *Oscar Wao* Belicia can be seen as a manifestation of “these crazy women characters.” She is responsible for the family living in a Dominican diaspora in the United States, and thus responsible for preserving the Dominican way within the diaspora.

Migration is often set in motion by events that make life difficult in the native country. For the Dominicans such events, or traumas, include “La Era de Trujillo,” the American invasion of 1965, and severe economic crises through the 1980’s and 90’s (Valerio-Holguín, 1). Belicia’s traumatic experience is a particular manifestation of the trauma of Trujillo which caused Dominicans to immigrate in vast numbers to the United States. In *Hybridity*, Prabhu points out that in diaspora discourses trauma is the basis of solidarity; however, not everyone in a diaspora has necessarily experienced the foundational trauma:

Trauma is heard rather than seen, and is that which was even “overheard.” If trauma is the “tradition” of diaspora, then, we are tracking, with Freud, its transmission over generations. Diaspora is thus held up by trauma. That is, the memory of shared trauma that assures diasporic cohesion in the present (10).

This can also be said of the Dominican diaspora in the United States, as one finds several generations with different relationships to the trauma that has placed them there. What we can call the “parental generation” left the Dominican Republic as adults, and it is their trauma the diaspora are founded on. As noted, in *Oscar Wao* the diaspora is founded on Belicia’s trauma and she can thus be seen as one of the guardians of the “Dominican-ness” within a community who “seek to reaffirm themselves by identification with their original culture through time” (Valerio-Holguín, 2). Belicia’s trauma justifies the strong affiliation with the Dominican Republic.

Dominicans like Yuniór and Díaz himself who left the Dominican Republic as children are representatives of *Generation 1.5*. They had to transit “from one sociocultural environment to another” and thus became “capable of negotiating both cultures” (Valerio-Holguín, 2). This gives them a different perspective on diaspora than their parents have. We can say that the “One-and-a-Half Generation” have heard of their parents’ trauma, while Dominican-Americans have overheard it. Dominican-Americans, like Lola and Oscar, are born and raised by Dominican parents in the United States. They assimilate to the culture in the United States to a greater extent than the parental generation. This contributes to what seems to be quite a difference between the Dominican in America and the Dominican-American. According to Díaz, Dominican-Americans are completely new to their parents who cannot understand and accept them, unless they conform to what they are expected to be: “For us there’s this cultural component: You’re Dominican only if you do this, this, and that. And if you do this and that, you’ll be accepted to a certain degree and if you don’t, people will scorn you for it” (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams). Although Belicia herself does not talk about her traumatic experiences, both Yuniór and her children appear to be well informed of her story as they have heard and overheard it.

Since they belong to different generations, the members of the De León-Cabral family have different bases for experiencing life within the Dominican community. This relates to a point Monika Fludernik makes, that “[n]obody has the same dream entirely; and nobody’s diaspora looks wholly like their neighbour’s” (xi). Although it is established that the definition of diaspora has changed, and that contemporary uses of the term include a range of experiences, it is worth exploring whether all of the characters in *Oscar Wao* are in fact living in a diaspora. Their experience may be examined in light of Arif Dirlik’s observation, that “a diasporic identification may be a matter of choice rather than necessity” (100). As noted, direct references to diaspora are mostly related to Belicia. She substitutes the Dominican

Republic with the Dominican diaspora where she aims to preserve “Dominican-ness.” She identifies with the original Dominican culture and thus has not attempted to integrate to American culture. Her children, on the other hand, have had contact with American culture continuously while growing up, only experiencing the Dominican culture at home and within their local community. Thus they identify with American culture too, and, Lola particularly, longs for the freedom the Western way provides. She feels trapped in the home and within the Dominican culture with its traditional gender roles, and suffers under her mother’s expectations: “You don’t know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around – *especially* the ones that are never around. What it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying perfect Dominican slave” (56). Despite her objections Lola has a strong Dominican identity that is further developed through a longer stay with La Inca in the Dominican Republic. Lola’s own diasporic position also causes her to reach out to other minority and diasporic groups.

Oscar’s experience is different than his sister’s much because he is a boy and therefore has other expectations to live up to. Oscar, however, does not live up to the standards of the Dominican male, nor does he fit into the American culture, as he is “too weak for this Hard New World” (43). Since Oscar neither finds his place within the Dominican community nor the American, he retreats from reality. He escapes into an imaginary world created by books, movies and games that become his safe haven. I will explore Oscar’s position in detail in chapter Three.

What Oscar and Lola do have in common is that, in contrast to the parental generation who keeps to their own community, they belong to a generation who continues to mix with other cultures in multicultural New Jersey. As Prabhu points out, they direct their energy towards new connections in the present, and continue to produce and reproduce “themselves anew through transformation and difference” (Hall 1996, 235). Still, their experiences can

thus be described by the expanded, new meanings of diaspora. Due to their background and strong identification with the Dominican it would be very difficult for them to not identify with the diaspora. Thus I would say that all of the family members' experiences can be named diaspora experiences. However, each of the characters' diaspora is unique.

The different views on the world also become a source of endless conflicts that manifests themselves differently between Belicia and Lola than between Belicia and Oscar. The Dominican patriarchal society that Belicia grew up in is strict on girls and demands a lot more of them than of boys. Even though Belicia cannot live up to this ideal herself she expects it from Lola. However, as Lola grows up in a western culture she resists the Dominican way, which causes conflicts between mother and daughter. Belicia has not got the same expectations to Oscar, but as he is no typical Dominican she cannot understand him. She tries to push him *out* of the house while she wants to keep Lola *in* the house. In the interview with *The Progressive* Díaz explains the different relationship he and his sisters had to their mother: "I always thought that my mom and my sisters, without knowing it, were shackled together by history, by survival, and by this desire to be free of all those things—to be a person, to be an individual. They were all shackled together in ways that I wasn't" (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams). The same difference is recreated in the novel and is part of what separates Lola and Oscar's experiences.

However, as all of the characters, like most of Dominicans of the diaspora, travel back and forth between the Old and the New World they all experience how the two worlds co-exist and change simultaneously. They seek back to their origins as "Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine in reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can" (271), but as they find the Dominican Republic changed they become tourists in their own country. Stuart Hall describes the difficulties of returning to the Caribbean thus: "To return to the Caribbean after any long absence is to experience again the shock of the 'doubleness' of

similarity and difference” (Hall 1996, 227). This doubleness is also apparent in *Oscar Wao*, when the family is returning to the Dominican Republic. The subchapter that reveals the trip is named “Oscar Takes a Vacation” (270), but in the chapter itself the narrator tells us that, “Oscar hadn’t been home in years.” As Oscar has never known another home than the United States it would be natural to think that when he visits the Dominican Republic it would be on vacation. However, the contradiction between vacation and home discloses a profound discord between notions of home and not home. For Dominicans of the diaspora to go back to the Dominican Republic will always be to return to home to the native land. Similarly, as Oscar attempts to adapt to the Dominican ways the subchapter titles change, and describe Oscar as an Islander: “The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Nativeland” (272); and “Oscar Goes Native” (276). Towards the end of the novel Oscar has an exchange of letters with his love Ybón where two different ways of regarding a place as home is revealed:

Go home.

But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls, he wrote back.

This is my home.

Your real home, mi amor.

A person can’t have two? (318).

Oscar sees both the Dominican Republic and the United States as his home, while Ybón thinks he belongs in the United States. This relates to how Valerio-Holguín refers to people returning to their native country like the De León-Cabral family, as “postcolonial tourists.” He claims that by returning to the Dominican Republic they “transform the here/now into a there/now, because if they truly have exchanged time, they speak from the hegemonic space” (Valerio-Holguín, 3). Because Dominicans living in the United States, especially *Generation 1.5* and Dominican-Americans, are shaped by being members of Western society their

perspective becomes the perspective of the European and the American (Valerio-Holguín, 3). This is true also of Oscar. Although he is raised by a Dominican mother in a Dominican community it is within the frames of United States' society. He has a strong Dominican identity that makes him feel at home in the Dominican Republic, but he can never pass for an islander. He is also caught in an in-between position, like other representatives of *Generation 1.5*.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Hall remarks that “[p]ractices of representations always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of *enunciation*” (Hall 1996, 222). In *Oscar Wao* the task of narrating the story is placed with Yunior. He ostensibly grows up in New Jersey like Oscar and Lola, and, as Hanna remarks, his perspective is therefore shaped by his own diasporic position (505). This affords him to see outside the confines of the nation (Hanna, 505) as he narrates the history of the De León-Cabral family, as well as the history of the Dominican Republic. He characterizes himself as a Watcher whose main task is to observe the world. Still, his position also poses challenges. Yunior's project is to narrate the past in order to gain a better understanding of the present, but there are parts of this past that he has no knowledge of. Several events that take place during Trujillo's ruling have been silenced and are left out of “the historiography sponsored by the Trujillo regime” (Hanna, 504). This is what Yunior calls “the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands” (259). Hanna claims that this silence is elemental in the novel, as it is “this silence that naturalizes the status quo and thus closes the possibility for change” (504). If Yunior succeeds in his project it would then alter the premises for change: if one has knowledge of past events it is possible to avoid making the same mistakes again. Oscar repeats Belicia's mistakes, perhaps because she never talked about them. Because Yunior tells Oscar's story, writes his counterspell, so to speak, it would perhaps be possible to break the circle and prevent history from repeating itself.

Hall also suggests that within the postcolonial experience, identity is not rediscovered, but produced grounded in the re-telling of the past (1996, 224). His point relates to the history telling in *Oscar Wao*, commenting that “[w]e should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginary rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails” (Hall 1996, 224). Yunior breaks the silence by filling gaps in history, using his imagination. According to Hanna, by doing this he aims to uncover the “truth” that is hidden behind unevenly documented stories (Hanna, 507). Through Yunior’s re-telling of the characters’ history and the Dominican history he contributes to uncover their cultural background, their identity. Still, he chooses to leave some matters unresolved. An example of this is the final manuscript Oscar supposedly sent home from the Dominican Republic. The manuscript never arrives, but in his last letter to Lola Oscar explains that the manuscript contains his conclusions and “the cure to what ails us [...] The Cosmo DNA” (333). Oscar might be referring to the fukú as “what ails us,” and it can thus imply that Oscar thought of a way to lift the curse, but before he can share his findings he is killed and the manuscript is lost in the mail. These “coincidences” continue to sustain the power the fukú has in the novel. That Oscar does not get to reveal his findings and thus the opportunity to lift the curse is lost can also be read as a comment to how the fukú represents a part of the Dominican cultural background, and therefore, like with everything else that constitutes one’s background, it is not possible to dismiss.

In relation to history telling Hanna furthermore claims that “Yunior’s historiography [...] is an imaginative reconstruction that can only take place in the literary realm, since traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by accepted forms of evidence whereas Yunior’s history relies on imagination and invention” (Hanna, 504). But Yunior writes in part against a history that does exactly this, namely the history narrated by Trujillo’s regime. As Robert Elliot Fox puts it, “[h]istory is not true collective

memory; it is selective, hierarchical for the most part” (332). History is traditionally a one sided narrative where the narrative voice mostly represents the people of power.

As this chapter illustrates there are various ways of looking at contemporary diaspora. However, one thing that emerges from several of the critical stand points examined is that people of the diaspora are caught between two cultures, in the case of *Oscar Wao* the Dominican and American cultures. They are neither one nor the other. This is particularly apparent in relation to *Generation 1.5* who is capable of negotiating both cultures. But as Díaz suggests this can be confusing, as one “exists” in two worlds simultaneously, phasing in and out. The confusion felt by being in an in-between position can also be explored in relation to the framework of textual references Díaz intertwines in this narrative. In Chapter Two I will therefore examine intertextuality in *Oscar Wao*.

Chapter Two:

Intertextuality in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

A prominent feature in *Oscar Wao* is the extended use of other texts. Junot Díaz borrows from several quite different sources, and the intertextual relations their presences in the novel bring about will be the focus of this chapter. However, before I take on the issue of intertextuality, I would like to revisit Stuart Hall's account of the three presences in the Caribbean.

In the Introduction we saw how Stuart Hall, in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," borrows Aimée Césaire's and Léopold Senghor's metaphor of the three different "presences" to which the Caribbean cultural identities can be related: *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Européenne* and *Presence Américain*. Hall explains how *Presence Africaine* is the site of the repressed, in which Africa is the signifier that could not be represented in slavery and thus becomes the unspeakable African presence in Caribbean culture, the secret code with which every Western text was re-read (1996, 230). On the other hand, he says, "Europe was a case of endlessly speaking – and endlessly speaking *us*" (1996, 232). What he means by this is that the European presence has "positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation," and the Caribbean dialogue "with and against *Presence Européenne* is almost as complex as the 'dialogue' with Africa" (1996, 233). *Presence Américain* is however a different kind of presence from the two others as it is "not so much power, as ground, place, territory" (1996, 234). It is the physical place, the Caribbean itself: "[T]he primal scene – where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West" (1996, 234). The "stage" collapses the many different cultural "presences" which constitute the Caribbean identity, and marks "the beginning of diaspora" (1996, 235).

The “presences” are representatives of both “space” and “place.” It is therefore useful to take a closer look at the distinction between the two terms. In her article “Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance,” Cathy Turner, gives Michel De Certeau’s definition of “space” and “place” as follows: “[P]lace is an ordering system, a set of material conditions which propose a ‘proper’ use. Space is produced by the ways in which place is used, and may articulate the ‘proper’ in various ways, or may transgress its implicit rules” (373). According to this definition, the Europeans who “discovered” the Caribbean and settled the land created a new space. They regarded the New World as “empty” land, “*Terra Incognita*,” thus disregarding the people already living there. They introduced a “top down” world view, from which they wrote history and other stories. Through the use of power they transgressed the original meaning of the Caribbean, and *Presence Europeenne* was superimposed on the *Presence Americain*. Also, through slavery, *Presence Africaine* was brought into the Caribbean sphere. There the African cultures were also repressed and became, as Hall states, the unspeakable African presence in the Caribbean.

In “Palimpsest or Potential Space?” Turner also draws on Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas’ use of the ideas of “host” and “ghost” in performance theory (373), which I would like to borrow here in relation to the mentioned presences in the Caribbean. Within performance-theatre “host” and “ghost” have been used to describe the relationship between place and event: “The host site is haunted for a time by a ghost that the theatre-makers create. Like all ghosts it is transparent and the host can be seen through the ghost” (Turner, 373-74). If we transpose this to the Caribbean space, the *Presence Americain* can thus be regarded as the host that is haunted by the ghosts of *Presence Europeenne* and *Presence Africaine*. The presences co-exist, co-share the stage, if you will, where the European is the dominant and more visible.

Turner further describes how the “ghost” encompasses events, narratives and performances that arise from the spaces they represent. Also, the “host” is not an empty place, but already a layered space that is formed by lived experience and past use: “Each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting. Thus space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings – a palimpsest (Turner, 373). As all of the presences consist of layers they provide different writings and rewritings of the Caribbean, creating a multiple-layered space. Thus the Caribbean space can be envisaged as a palimpsest.

The palimpsest is a term that has been used within several different disciplines. In relation to literature Sarah Dillon suggests that it is a “phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other” (4). This definition of the palimpsest echoes Julia Kristeva’s description of intertextuality, a term she coined in the late 1960’s. In *Desire in Language*, she explains it through the notion of a text being “a trans-linguistic apparatus” and “a productivity.” This entails that “its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive- constructive) [...] [and] that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva, 36). In other words, the text operates through and across language by redistributing its utterances, which is taken from other texts whether or not the author has intended it. Kristeva believes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). She was influenced by the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin, and developed the notion of intertextuality as a synthesis of what she found useful in their theories: she took “the theory of the sign, with its two components, the signifier and the signified” from Saussure, and “the idea that language is dialogical ... express[ing] a plurality of meanings” from Bakhtin (Irvin, 228). Kristeva’s

intertextuality can thus be defined as “the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (15). In literature this entails that by using elements from one text in another the meaning can be altered through the new context.

We see that both Dillon’s palimpsest and Kristeva’s intertextuality are preoccupied with the creation of text through the coming together of several other already existing texts. According to Dillon, in a palimpsest the spatial heterogeneity between texts is eliminated, and “they exist in a hymenic fusion or marriage which at the same time preserves their separate identities and inscribes difference within the heart of the identity of the palimpsest” (97). The same description can be used to account for how the Caribbean cultural identity has been formed, and is still being formed and transformed, through the coming together of different cultures, or presences. We shall take a closer look at some of the texts that are present in *Oscar Wao*, and how they constitute a palimpsest of references to the presences I have discussed here.

As stated, the strong presence of other texts is a prominent feature of great importance in the novel. It draws explicitly on them and they provide a framework for the story. This is made clear already as we turn the cover of the book and encounter two very different epigraphs: a quotation from the well known Marvel comic *Fantastic Four* and an excerpt from the poem “The Schooner *Flight*” by Derek Walcott. Throughout the novel Díaz continues to intertwine quotations, references and allusions to different works, mostly popular cultural ones. It is these kinds of intertextual and intercultural relationships I am going to focus on in this chapter, starting with the two epigraphs.

The epigraphs can be read as representations of two different world views, both emphasizing and nuancing the ambiguity of the Old and the New. They foreshadow a

dualistic point of view which will, as we shall see, contribute to the ambiguity that runs throughout the entire novel. Derek Walcott belongs to a tradition and generation of Caribbean writers searching for their African roots, thus looking back to Africa as the Old World in relation to the Caribbean as a part of the New World. The *Fantastic Four*, on the other hand, is as close as we get to a prototypical American New World phenomenon, facing towards an unwritten and open future. In relation to this epigraph the Caribbean is regarded as a part of the Old World, the departure point.

Oscar Wao opens with the following epigraph from the *Fantastic Four*:

“Of what import are brief, nameless lives ... to **Galactus??**”

To be able to appreciate the epigraph’s role in *Oscar Wao* some information about the stories in the *Fantastic Four* may be needed. They revolve around the four main characters Reed Richards, Susan Storm, her brother Johnny Storm, and Reed’s friend from college Ben Grimm. Originally, they were four normal human beings, but after being exposed to cosmic rays during a scientific mission to outer space, they gained superpowers. They formed the Fantastic Four, where they are known as Mister Fantastic, Invisible Woman, Human Torch, and Thing, and they are now “dedicated to the betterment of the world through scientific discovery and defense against evil” (Marvel). The Fantastic Four are portrayed as a dysfunctional, yet loving family. In this manner they resemble the De León - Cabral family in the novel, who, despite almost constant conflicts and arguments, and near inhuman trials and challenges to overcome, take care of and protect each other. Through their challenges, including facing death, they, too, encounter the supernatural. We find examples of this when Belicia is almost beaten to death in a sugarcane field:

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt.

This one was quite large for its species and placed its large intelligent paws on her chest and stared down at her (149).

Similarly, when Oscar tries to kill himself by jumping off the New Brunswick train bridge we read that he: “[c]losed his eyes (or maybe he didn’t) and when he opened them there was something straight out of Ursula Le Guin standing by his side. Later, when he would describe it he would call it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that that wasn’t what it was” (190). The image of the Golden Mongoose is linked to the fukú and thus to *Presence Africaine*. As discussed in chapter One, the fictional universe of *Oscar Wao* projects fukú as a part of the Dominican cultural heritage, which makes it impossible for the characters to escape it. In a similar manner to how the Caribbean sphere is haunted by its past stagings, the fukú haunts the novel and its characters. However, not everyone in the novel believes that Oscar’s and Belicia’s encounters with the Golden Mongoose are evidence that they are cursed. In Belicia’s case many Islanders take her “near-fatal beating as irrefutable proof that the House of Cabral was indeed victim of a high-level fukú” (152), while others believe that since she survived she had to be blessed. This includes La Inca, who “to her dying day [...] believed that Beli had met not a curse but God out in that canefield” (152). Oscar’s jump from the New Brunswick train bridge should have killed him instantly, but because he lands on a garden divider he survives. Yuniór claims that he miscalculated because he was drunk, while Belicia believes “he was being watched from up high” (191). Their faith in God seems to neutralize the fukú and thus functions as a Zafa.

Returning now to the epigraph, Galactus is one of the most feared villains in the universe of the *Fantastic Four*. He was originally a humanoid called Galan, and the sole survivor of the universe that existed before the Big Bang. This universe collapsed into a

Cosmic Egg¹⁰, and Galan was submitted to intense radiation that filled him with new energy. The Phoenix Force¹¹ of the dying universe brought Galan into the Cosmic Egg, so that when the next Big Bang caused the Cosmic Egg to explode and become stars and planets, Galan was simultaneously re-created as Galactus. While new life began to populate the new universe Galactus drifted around in his spaceship, and through countless of centuries he developed into his current form. In order to survive Galactus must devour the energies of entire worlds. At first he is content with going centuries without feedings, searching out uninhabited worlds to consume. But his hunger grows bigger, and he begins to consume inhabited worlds when he can find no others. In the issue of the *Fantastic Four* the epigraph is taken from, “If This Be Doomsday”¹², Galactus has landed on Earth. He needs the planet’s energy and must devour it in order to survive. He does not care that he will kill all life, and it becomes the Fantastic Four’s task to stop him. With the help of the Watcher Uatu¹³ and the Silver Surfer¹⁴, they manage to do this. In the novel the narrator, Yuniior, refers to himself precisely as a Watcher. The Watchers are an advanced extra-terrestrial race that observe less advanced races. We see that Yuniior possesses the characteristics of a Watcher as he is a more adept and popular boy than Oscar, and observes him in all his trials and attempts to fit in.

As we saw in chapter one, the Caribbean can be regarded both as a point of arrival in the New World, and a point of departure from the Old World. Due to the changed immigration patterns, the Caribbean people travel back and forth between the New and Old World, thus introducing what we can think of as a *New Presence Americain* to the Caribbean.

¹⁰ The Cosmic Egg is a sphere of disorganized, compact primordial matter.

¹¹ The Phoenix Force was born of the void between states of being. When the previous universe was destroyed the Force saved all existence from eternal damnation.

¹² http://marvel.wikia.com/Fantastic_Four_Vol_1_49

¹³ The Watchers are a technologically advanced extraterrestrial race that observes less advanced races. They spread out throughout galaxies, and each chose a star-system to observe. Uatu is the Watcher that observes Earth’s star-system.

¹⁴ The Silver Surfer works for Galactus, aiding him in locating worlds to consume. He offered to do this job if Galactus would spare his home planet. In “If This be Doomsday” the Silver Surfer encounters the blind Alicia Masters, who sensed his inner nobility and pleaded with him to spare humanity. He then turns on Galactus and helps the Fantastic Four to save Earth.

This new presence entails the influence of the United States of America on the Caribbean people, and is thus different from Hall's *Presence Americain* which includes the "ghostly" presence of the indigenous population such as Arawaks and Tainos. The *New Presence Americain* is also linked to the Dominicans as what Valerio-Holguín calls "postcolonial tourists," as this presence influence the way they view the Dominican Republic: "The gaze of the postcolonial tourist is the gaze of the European and American" (Valerio-Holguín, 3).

The epigraph from the *Fantastic Four* establishes a close connection to American popular culture, and it thus represents an aspect of the *New Presence Americain*. Díaz himself has argued that the comic book genre is a truly American form, but a part of American culture that has been marginalized. Díaz finds this strange as he claims that together with the blues it is one "of the most original indigenous forms [...] [and it has] been an important part of what we would call the North American narrative, what we would call the formative literary experience" (Díaz in Celayo & Shook 2007, 15). It is difficult to say why Díaz states that the comic book is a marginalized form, as comic books are popular among different groups of people. They are popular among children, thus becoming a part of their first literary experience, and they may be regarded as a part of an American mythology. And, as we shall see later, Díaz makes use of this status in the novel. However, he might be referring to how the genre is often associated with nerds, a group that can be characterized as marginalized.

Regardless of why Díaz believes comics to be marginalized, the fact that he does is important in relation to *Oscar Wao*. However, if we accept that the comic genre has been marginalized, it also becomes understandable why Hanna has chosen to classify it as a "nerd genre" (500). Nerds are stereotypically a demoted group of people that feel ostracized. The imagined worlds of the comic book, and other related genres, may thus represent an escape from reality for such a group, and provide points of reference for someone who might feel like they do not belong in the actual world. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that

comics, and other “nerd genres,” are a very large part of Oscar’s life. I will therefore come back to this, too, in relation to Oscar’s identity. The references to comics are furthermore important to how Díaz constructs the novel, and the storytelling itself. Hanna claims that “Yunior frames the story through the use of Caribbean and United States popular cultural forms” because these are “the most appropriate to represent the reality lived by Oscar and his family as members of the Dominican diaspora” (511). As we saw previously, this position of being a member of the Dominican diaspora is shared by Díaz, who can also be said to write from a marginalized position, being a Dominican American author and hence in some ways outside the mainstream, be that “American” or “Latino.” By bringing the *New Presence Americane* into the novel through the reference to the *Fantastic Four* an American “template” is introduced in a narrative that otherwise appears to be more “Dominican.” There is a distinct difference in how the “Dominican-ness” and the “American-ness” is portrayed, as the characters live within a Dominican society both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic, while the American presence exists almost exclusively through literary references.

Returning now to the epigraphs, they can be said to function as guides, steering us in a direction where marginalized popular culture plays an important role, and anticipating the narrative of the main protagonist as a “ghetto nerd” (11). Still, because comic books are not only read by stereotypical nerds, but is a genre that is well known among the general population too, it suits Díaz’ agenda very well. In an interview with Wajahat Ali titled “Revenge of the Ghetto Nerd, The Wondrous Life of Pulitzer Winner Junot Díaz,” he states that one of his reasons for taking bits and pieces from well known, different contemporary sources is to use them as “prepackaged metaphors to communicate” (Díaz in Ali 2008). Thus the references are not chosen at random, but with a view to making his average, contemporary readers grasp concepts and ideas that would otherwise be unknown to them. In “Revenge of the Ghetto Nerd” Díaz explains, that he did this to help readers understand who and what

Trujillo was, and how the Dominicans experienced living under his ruling, because most people “wouldn’t know what it would mean to be on an island or culture where one individual would have such supreme power” (Díaz in Ali 2008). The reason Díaz turns to the comic book genre in particular for help is that it is a genre concerned with the issue of good versus evil. In comics, and other “nerd genres,” it is perfectly normal and accepted that some people have supernatural powers and that some are beings from outer space, like Galactus. Díaz uses these features to his advantage in order to “explain the world [he] was trying to bring to life, i.e. the Dominican Republic” (Díaz in Ali 2008) during the Trujillo years. In the novel, Dominicans are said to believe that Trujillo actually had supernatural powers.

In her essay “Reassembling the Fragments” Hanna describes former president Trujillo as “a force that is supernaturally connected with evil” (503). This description might as well have been used for a comic book villain. We also find similar descriptions in the manner Trujillo is characterized throughout the novel:

At first glance, 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 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 (2).

Díaz initially uses these fictitious villains to establish a familiar point of reference for the readers but the narrator, Yuniór the Watcher, emphasises that no matter how terrible imagined villains are, and how much evil they do, Trujillo was worse: so dreadful that no one could imagine it, much less put it down in words. If we return to the epigraph, Galactus can be seen as an image, or even an anticipation of the depiction of Trujillo –since both of them are said to have godlike powers. Also, as Galactus consumes inhabited planets, and Trujillo did not hesitate to have anyone killed, “brief, nameless lives” are not of importance to either of them.

Trujillo's "unearthliness" is also brought up later in the novel. As an epigraph to part II of the book, which is set in the Dominican Republic, we find a quote from the Dominican newspaper *La Nación*:

Men are not indispensable. But Trujillo is irreplaceable. For Trujillo is not a man. He is ... a cosmic force. ... Those who try to compare him to his ordinary contemporaries are mistaken. He belongs to ... the category of those born to a special destiny (204).

The language used, particularly the wording "cosmic force," resembles the style of the comic book. Thus this quote is among the ones that draw the novel and the comic book genre closer together. The genre functions also as a bridge between the Dominican and the American culture. In "The Local and the Global: Globalization and ethnicity" Hall claims that together with other visual and graphic arts, such as television, films and mass advertising, comic books are a part of a new global culture (Hall 1991, 27). This "[g]lobal mass culture," he argues, "is dominated by the modern means of cultural production, dominated by the image which crosses and re-crosses linguistic frontiers much more rapidly and more easily, and which speaks across languages in a more immediate way" (27). The images in the comic book can be "read" and interpreted by people everywhere, even if they do not understand the text.

We see that the reference to the *Fantastic Four* evokes the dreadfulness of Trujillo, and at the same time a new life in the United States, as the *Fantastic Four* is a part of the modern, or even postmodern, America. The reference to the *Fantastic Four* thus represents a New World perspective, while Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*," which refracts a curiosity of the past by looking back and searching for the African roots, represents an Old World perspective. We also find another difference between the epigraphs in that the creators of the *Fantastic Four*, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, did not base the comic on another text in the same manner as Walcott did, who, as we shall see, is influenced by Homer.

Derek Walcott is a Caribbean writer who was born in the former British colony Saint Lucia, Lesser Antilles. There he received a colonial education which provided him with knowledge of and interest in the Western classics. This led him to draw on particularly the Greek classics, and the works of Homer, in his own writings. In “Walcott, Homer, and the ‘Black Atlantic’,” Isidore Okpewho states that Walcott saw himself as the “Homer of the Antilles, appointed [...] to record the region’s virtues, its woes and its destiny” (33). Still Walcott has felt a close relation to Africa, perhaps because both of his grandmothers were presumed to be descendants of slaves, enforcing his consequent close proximity to the underlying *Presence Africaine*. In 1992 Walcott received the Nobel Prize in literature and was by the Nobel committee described as “an assiduous traveller to other countries” but as a man that “always [has], not least in his efforts to create an indigenous drama, felt himself deeply-rooted in Caribbean society with its cultural fusion of African, Asiatic and European elements” (Allén 1997). Walcott obtains a position in between European and African culture, but he is a part of a tradition that turns to Africa, the Old World, in order to tell the New World-story of the Caribbean.

The second stanza of Walcott’s poem “The Schooner *Flight*” is the second epigraph we encounter in *Oscar Wao*. As the entire stanza is important for the novel I quote it in full:

Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!
From that dog rotting down Wrightson Road
To when I was a dog on these streets;
If loving these islands must be my load,
Out of corruption my soul takes wings,
But they had started to poison my soul
With their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,
coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,

*so I leave it for them and their carnival-
I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road.
I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patios for
any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
when these slums of empire was paradise.
I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.*

This poem is taken from the collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* which was published in 1979. However, an earlier version was printed in 1977, and in this edition Walcott included a footnote describing the poem very briefly: “THE SCHOONER, FLIGHT is a work-in-progress about the travels of a West Indian sailor called Shabine, the St. Lucian Creole name for a mulatto” (1977, 795). With this Walcott steers the reading of the poem: the mulatto denotes the Caribbean culture, as it can be said to be a mix of different cultures, most notably European and African. Thus, by choosing the name “Shabine,” Walcott signifies the Caribbean in between-ness as it is influenced both by the *Presence Africaine* and the *Presence Europeenne*.

It is also this in between-ness that has lead Walcott to what Norval Edwards in “Derek Walcott: The Poetics of Two Margins” calls “a lifelong habit of thinking ‘in two margins’” (12). According to Edwards Walcott’s poetics is a “double-margined one” that “derive[s] from [his] consistent investment in a creolized double consciousness that is situated at the

borders of languages, cultures, territories, identities, and ethnicities” (12). Edwards points especially to the aspect of the languages as Walcott is from the multilingual Saint Lucia, where different languages follow different aspects of life and social status; Standard English, Creole English, and French Creole (patois). Walcott includes the different languages in his poetry, thus making it reflect the different sides of his identity. He “adopts the role of ‘a two-headed sentry’, a Janus-like figure” (Edwards, 14). Traces of Creole English is also apparent in “The Schooner’s *Flight*.”

According to Okpewho “the Odyssean journey may be seen as the commanding paradigm in Walcott’s middle period¹⁵ [...] in which we see either the poet himself or some alter ego traveling through the Caribbean/American region and lamenting world of its sociopolitical life, though not without a touch of chastened optimism” (33). This is also apparent in “The Schooner *Flight*,” as it too is an epic poem in the style of the *Odyssey*. Here it is, as mentioned, the sailor Shabine who is traveling through the Caribbean. But Shabine might be one of Walcott’s alter egos, as he explicitly contemplates on writing the poem, comparing it to the schooner:

You ever look up from some lonely beach
and see a far schooner? Well, when I write
this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
I go draw and knot every line as tight
as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
my common language go be the wind ,
my pages the sails of the schooner Flight.

But let me tell you how this business begin (1992, 217).

¹⁵ The collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* belongs to this period.

Okpewho bases much of the argument in his article on Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double consciousness* in which Gilroy adopts the image of ships "as a guiding metaphor in their signification far less of 'the triangular trade' (16-17) than of 'the unfinished history of blacks in the modern world' (80)" (Okpewho, 27). In "The Schooner *Flight*" both of these significations of the image are present, and as a schooner is a type of sailboat the title alone reveals the importance of the image. Throughout the poem the theme of the Caribbean history is brought up several times and we encounter both the *Presence Africaine* and *Europeenne*, and first *Presence Europeenne*, when Shabine meets a personification of "History." "History" is wearing cream linen and a cream hat; an outfit which directs our thought towards a white male. But, in Shabine's words, "History" "ain't recognize me / a parchment Creole" (Walcott 1992, 220). This rejection of Shabine by "History" can be seen in relation to a general sentiment among Caribbean scholars. They reject "History (with a capital H) as a totalizing project in Western (colonial, imperial) discourse" (Okpewho, 29). This project is also what Hall refers to when he remarks that Europe was "endlessly speaking us" (1996, 232). In Walcott's poem, "History" represents this history written by *Presence Europeenne*. He is therefore unable to recognize Shabine who also carries an "African-ness" that is unknown, or unrecognized, to Western History. Thus Caribbean writers, scholars, and others writing from such a mixed background shaped by the palimpsested space, are looking back, searching for *Presence Africaine's* writing of history in order to be recognized for their Caribbean in between-ness. In this process they are digging through the layers of the palimpsest and re-writing history themselves. However, they are not able to see the world through the perspective of Africans. As many Caribbean scholars have received a colonial education, and some of them have spent many years living within Western culture, their perspective will be coloured by this. We can thus argue that they, too, see the

Caribbean through the gaze of the “postcolonial tourist.” The history they write will therefore be a product of their mixed cultural backgrounds.

Second, we encounter the two presences together as Shabine’s *Flight* “float[s] through a rustling forest of ships / with sails like dry paper” (222) hearing the orders of the British officers Admiral Rodney and Lord Nelson, and the French Admiral De Grasse. The slave triangle is completed when they also pass ships returning from Africa:

Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,
Our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose,
to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who knows
who his grandfather is, much less his name?
Tomorrow our landfall will be Barbados. (1992, 223)

According to Okpewho, Walcott rejects the “panoply of ancestors” usually employed in defining Caribbean identity. He argues that “[c]learly Shabine in ‘The Schooner *Flight*,’ articulates Walcott’s sentiment when, confronting the phantoms of his ancestors, he dismisses the epiphany with the question ‘Who knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?’” (31). This can also be seen in relation to the ships sailing under “Flags of all nations,” which brings to mind how the slaves brought to the Caribbean came from different countries and belonged to different cultures. This “complicates” the Caribbean identity further since the *Presence Africaine* is not one, homogenous culture. In addition it makes it impossible to trace ones ancestry back to a particular African country, so Walcott’s dismissal might be one to spare oneself the efforts to solve a mystery that lacks a solution.

If we return now to the epigraph as it reads in *Oscar Wao*, we see that, particularly, the final four lines describe how the Caribbean identity is a mix of many different identities. It also invites a discussion on national identity within and outside the borders of a nation:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation (Walcott 1992, 216)

The duality of the final line reads as signifying an uncertainty of whether Shabine's diverse background makes him an outsider that cannot find his place or a symbol of the nation as the multiplicity of cultures apply to the whole of that nation. It is precisely this multiplicity of cultures that constitutes the "Caribbean-ness," hence Shabine can be seen as its personification. Hanna comments on this as follows: "The Walcott poem presents a speaker who sees himself as a representative figure of the nation, as his biography contains the elements of the nation's entire history. Even his language is particular to this history" (Hanna, 499). Yet there remains a touch of fright that this may not come true, that he remains a "nobody."

"The Schooner *Flight*" indicates that an individual can become a national emblem, which is precisely what Díaz proposes his novel shows: "the book argues that a freakish individual, in the case of the Dominican Republican dictator Trujillo, a very specific individual, became a national character" (Díaz in Ali 2008). But, whereas Shabine is a representative of a nation through "birthright," Trujillo made himself the representative of the Dominican nation through power. Yuniors explains how he is "[f]amous for changing ALL OF THE NAMES of ALL OF THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself" (2). Again, in contrast to Shabine, Trujillo exceeds his mandate and "sets out to occupy the physical spaces as well as the imaginary of the island" (Hanna, 503).

As we have seen here, the two epigraphs I have so far examined exemplify how other texts are present in the novel, thus creating an intertextual relationship of some complexity.

There are numerous other references to a range of texts, and while I cannot here examine them all, I will comment on a few of them below. As we saw previously Kristeva's definition of intertextuality is preoccupied with the creation of text through the coming together of several other already existing texts. In relation to *Oscar Wao* her observation on the resulting "ambivalence" is highly relevant. According to her "[t]he term "ambivalence" implies the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history; for the writer, they are one and the same" (Kristeva, 68). We find this idea reflected in the novel in Díaz' focus on writing both the history of the Dominican Republic, and contemporary Dominican and American societies. He uses other texts explicitly as a means to describe the immigrant experience: "the extreme experience of coming from the Third World and suddenly appearing in New Jersey" (Díaz in Celayo & Shook 2007, 15). The presence of other texts in the narrative conveys a feeling of confusion as to where one belongs. As we have seen this particularly applies in relation to the two very different epigraphs that provide a dialogue between the Old and the New World which illustrates a point made by Hall: "Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation" (222). Díaz' own experiences as a writer of the margins, and as a man caught between two cultures is reflected through the ambiguity in the novel.

However, as previously noted, Kristeva believes intertextuality to appear whether or not the author is aware of, or intends it. I will however suggest that this is not the case in relation to Díaz who, as we have seen, explicitly, and intentionally, draws on other texts in order to engage in a dialogue with both his readers and the different presences of the Caribbean. A more dynamic approach to these relations would serve the reading of the novel better, and it may therefore be more fruitful to turn to Bakhtin's dialogism. Kristeva based much of her theory of intertextuality precisely on Bakhtin's theses on the dialogic text, remarking that he was "one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model

where literary structure does not simple *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure” (Kristeva, 64-5). In other words, the texts respond to, and interact with each other. Kristeva further explains this relation between texts through Bakhtin’s view on the “written word” as “an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context” (Kristeva, 65). Bakhtin’s dialogism includes not only the dialogue between texts, however, but also the dialogues that occur in the text between author, reader and culture. This in turn resembles the idea of the palimpsest, where writings from different sources inhabit the same space. However, the palimpsest, at least in Dillon’s understanding of it, does not take the texts’ origins into consideration:

It is my suggestion here that the palimpsest presents us with another global concept for this experience [the modern experience of writing], a more appropriate one than intertextuality since, while retaining the emphasis on the textual, it distances itself – by the very unrelatedness of the texts that constitute it – from the confusion with source study from which the term ‘intertextuality’ can now no longer be disentagled (Dillon, 85).

As established earlier, the texts present in *Oscar Wao* constitute a palimpsest of references to the presences previously discussed. Thus, according to Dillon, we should maintain emphasis on the texts and leave their origins unexplored. However, I will argue that in relation to Díaz the full meaning of intertextuality lies precisely in the sources of the texts that are juxtaposed in the novel. It is an examination of the sources of the epigraphs that leads us to read the novel as a dialogue between texts that represent different world views and cultures. The ambivalence felt in the novel is created through insertion of history and society by using texts of specific origins that represent the different positions Díaz speak from while negotiating both American and Dominican cultures.

The ambiguity that leads also to multiple “positions of enunciations” is echoed in Bakhtin’s definition of the novel, which may apply well to *Oscar Wao*: “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (Bakhtin 1998, 32). In the novel this is evident in several features, such as the different intertextual references which include both a range of references to popular cultural works such as science-fiction and comics, and to classical literature such as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*: “Beli returned to El Redentor [...] and set out to track down Jack Pujols with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who” (95). But diversity of voices also applies to how the points of view sometimes change between the characters, and allegedly the author. As noted Yunior is the narrator of the novel, but in chapter two “Wildwood, 1982-1985,” it is Lola who narrates the chain of events that leads to her being sent to live with La Inca in Santo Domingo. In chapter six the narrative voice changes several times. In the subchapter “A Note from Your Author” (284), it is supposedly Díaz himself who comments on his artistic choices after which he claims that if he had portrayed Ybón in a different way he would have been lying: “I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix, but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (285). However, as this is stated in the fictitious space of the novel it is hard to believe that this, too, is anything but fiction. Also in the subchapters “La Inca Speaks” (289) and “Ybón, as recorded by Oscar” (289) the narrative voice changes, and La Inca and Oscar record their version of the “truth.”

The multiplicities of voices and intertextual references present in *Oscar Wao* interestingly also illustrate another observation Bakhtin makes:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is *another’s speech in another’s language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two

speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author (324).

Hence, the different textual fragments implemented in *Oscar Wao* serve one purpose for Díaz and another for the characters. Díaz uses them as pre-packaged metaphors to communicate, and as a means to illustrate concepts and ideas unfamiliar to his contemporary readers. As Bakhtin notes elsewhere “[t]he word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin 1990, 293), and one must take it from others and make it one’s own. To make someone else’s language one’s own is part of the immigrant experience, and for Díaz to refract the Dominican-American one he has to factor in an extraordinary range of “languages” or utterances in order to do justice to this immense intricacy. He thus makes use of the intertextual references as they are the most appropriate to portray the reality experienced by the characters in the novel’s fictional universe. In order to convey Oscar’s experience he is retelling the present as well as the past.

Another element of Bakhtin’s theory that is relevant to *Oscar Wao* is his preoccupation with literature’s embeddedness in culture. In the article “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff,” he states that “[l]iterature is an inseparable part of culture and it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch” (1986a, 2). What we can draw from this is that literature has to be seen in relation to culture, and cannot be severed from it. Culture affects literature, and in the work of Díaz, we can turn it around and say that culture is also an inseparable part of literature.

Part of Díaz’ project is, as indicated earlier, to make outsiders understand the culture of the Dominican Republic and the dreadfulness of “La Era de Trujillo” through literature. He uses widely known literary elements from one culture in order to explain it to another. It is through this meeting of cultures that Díaz is able to illustrate Oscar’s struggles. As Bakhtin

states: “A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures” (Bakhtin 1986a, 7). Even though he claims that we cannot understand literature outside of a specific cultural epoch, an encounter with another culture will shed light on different sides of the literature, as it opens it up. In a paraphrase of what Edwards calls Walcott’s “The Poetics of Two Margins,” we could say that Bakhtin’s focus here is a “poetics of the margins.”

Complaining that literary critics are being too occupied with labelling literature, Bakhtin states in “Response” that:

In our enthusiasm for specification we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture; we have frequently forgotten that boundaries of these areas are not absolute, that in various epochs they have been drawn in various ways; and we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity (Bakhtin 1986a, 2).

Many of the issues we have looked at so far are related to the Dominicans¹⁶ as a marginalized people, both by being repressed by Europeans in the past, and by living in diasporas on the margins of contemporary United States society, in other words living “on the boundaries” and not “enclosed in specificity.” In “The Local and the Global” Hall in a similar vein points out that “the most profound cultural revolution has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation [...] Not just to be placed by the regime of some other, or imperializing eye but to reclaim some form of representation for themselves” (1991, 34). Both Junot Díaz and Derek Walcott are a part of this tradition of the margins. They are both

¹⁶ Here, for simplicity, I name the people of the Dominican Republic “Dominicans” although the “Dominicans” did not exist until the arrival of the Europeans. The people repressed by the Europeans were the original inhabitants, the Taino Indians, who were named Dominicans by the Europeans.

representatives of authors writing across boundaries, not trapped in one culture, but balancing the centres of two. They write the margin quite differently, as Walcott seeks backwards to the African roots, while Díaz is looking forward at the new world. However, Díaz is also concerned with looking back, and thus engages in a dialogue with both Walcott as the past, and the Fantastic Four as the future. He too can thus be seen as a Janus figure. Walcott himself has formulated how poetry embodies the past and the present: “Poetry [...] conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past” (1998, 69). The present is dependent on the past. This is also true in the novel, where Oscar’s story can be seen, as Oscar does, to be predetermined by events that took place long before his birth.

In Oscar Wao the story of the main protagonist is the story of a character’s coming-of-age. The same oscillation between here and there, between the presences explored in relation to diaspora and in relation to textual frameworks can also be examined in relation to how the novel negotiates the *Bildungsroman* genre. The next chapter will therefore focus on Oscar’s formation, and on the novel as a contemporary *Bildungsroman* through the lens of the diasporic experience of the Dominican-American society and, more specifically, Oscar himself.

Chapter Three:

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao as Bildungsroman

As we have seen, the story of *Oscar Wao* is also the story of a character's coming-of-age as it follows Oscar from 1974-1995, from his childhood in New Jersey till his life ends as young adult in the Dominican Republic. In this manner, it bears resemblance to the *Bildungsroman* which typically is a novel that depicts the development of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. In *The Liminal Novel*, Wangarĩ wa Nyatetũ-Waigwa describes the *Bildungsroman* as it appears in Western literary tradition as follows:

The *Bildungsroman* 'portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginning and growth to a certain stage of completeness' (Morgenstern 12). Completeness of *Bildung* need not entail accommodation with society, but rather the moment when the protagonist is sufficiently equipped to choose an individual stance in life (1).

She points out that the process of *Bildung* takes place on the terms of the society the protagonist lives in as the "world plays the role of the moulder, marking and maturing the protagonist to the point where he can finally make a personal choice out of what is available to him, adopting an individual attitude towards life" (1). This individual attitude includes the option to accept or reject the values represented by society. In "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism" Mikhail Bakhtin stresses that, as opposed to preceding types of novels where the hero was a *constant*, the protagonist in the *Bildungsroman* becomes a *variable*. The hero is in "the process of becoming" as it is a "novel of human *emergence*" (1986b, 21). This chapter will explore Oscar's "emergence." However, as Oscar inhabits an in-between position he is influenced by not one, but several societies, which complicates his process of formation.

In his article “Modernist studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends” Tobias Boes names the term *Bildungsroman* “one of the most successful and one of the most vexed contributions that German letters have made to the international vocabulary of literary studies” (230). He points to how the label has been disputed, defended, and taken for granted. He claims that “[t]he term is sometimes – especially within English departments – used so broadly that seemingly any novel [...] might be subsumed by it” (Boes, 230).

Traditionally the *Bildungsroman* genre is regarded as a nineteenth-century phenomenon as Boes notes that modernists’ way of writing in the twentieth-century has often been “blamed for the demise of a form that by its very definition requires narrative attention to minute and long-term changes” (231). The modernists’ turn towards “spontaneous self-creation” as opposed to the “narratives of long-term evolutionary change” also disqualified their works from the *Bildungsroman* genre (231). However, through the rise of new critical traditions such as feminist, post-colonial, and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s the traditional definition of *Bildungsroman* is expanded: “the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models” (Boes, 230). Boes notes that through explorations of twentieth-century literature some modernist novels have come to “be read as preserving a central link between individual and social development, while framing both in a new rhetorical vocabulary” (235). When such a reading is adopted it

become[s] obvious that the critical commonplace of a decline of the genre during the modernist period is a myopic illusion. In reality, the novel of formation continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide [...] the form can be adopted to suit modernist and post-modernist literary techniques (Boes, 239).

The *Bildungsroman* is no longer regarded as merely a nineteenth-century phenomenon, and the broadening of the use of the term in light of changes in the world is, according to Bakhtin, precisely what the genre itself illustrates. Even though Bakhtin's observation pertains to a different epoch than the literature Boes writes about, it is highly relevant to later periods since the idea of the changing foundations of the world applies now as much as then. He stresses that the protagonist

emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him [...] It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them (1986b, 23-24).

The transition point Bakhtin here describes is the point where the protagonist balances between past and present, between history and development, and echoes the in-between and transitional position of dispersed populations who are drawn between their native country and their host country. In their host country they are faced with a different world than in their country of origin, and therefore radical transformations and foundational changes of worlds are often central issues addressed in immigrant, minority, and post-colonial novels. As people have to adapt to a foreign language and culture with different social norms this is experienced as a transformation of everything known, which is why Junot Díaz refers to being an immigrant as an “extreme” experience (Díaz in Celayo and Shook, 15).

If we accept Boes' argument that contemporary coming-of-age narratives such as *Oscar Wao* only bear “cursory resemblance” to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, a revised theoretical framework is also necessary in close readings in order to appreciate the more complex role society has as “moulder.” In *The Liminal Novel*, Nyatetũ-Waigwa addresses this question and proposes the *liminal model* which she considers to offer more profitable tools for

analysing African novels (1). In the *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist is often faced with making a choice that marks a rite of passage. However, according to Nyatetū-Waigwa, for some characters the rite of passage remains incomplete. They are thus “suspended for ever in the liminal phase” (3). She explains that the liminal phase or “liminality” is the middle passage of a rite of passage where one is separated from society waiting to be reincorporated, and from this characteristic defines novels marked by such “unfinished” formation as liminal novels:

The liminal novel, then, is a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage, either overtly depicted [...] or implicitly evoked [...] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel the protagonist is still in the middle of the quest, either still moving towards what supposedly constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance (3).

Nyatetū-Waigwa stresses that this is not a result of the protagonist’s lack of desire to finish, but from his/her “inability to complete the quest under his present circumstances” (3). This model of the liminal novel forms the basis for her analysis of African novels of *Bildung* as she considers the framework better suited “to account for the problem of coming of age in the colonial situation” (3). As the Caribbean too has experienced the colonial situation, and both Africa and Europe are “present” in the region, Caribbean writers share some of the concerns and challenges of African writers. Thus it is also possible to regard Oscar’s coming of age in *Oscar Wao* in relation to a colonial situation, and adopt and transpose some of the features of Nyatetū-Waigwa’s liminal model to how this novel negotiates the *Bildungsroman* genre.

Nyatetū-Waigwa names the position the protagonist holds within his/her community one of the aspects of the liminal place. She remarks that “[u]nderstanding the nature of place and the hero’s initial relationship to it is crucial to our understanding of the form his educational journey takes” (15). In *Oscar Wao* this is an issue of double importance, as

Oscar's position can be examined in relation to two different communities, both the American and the Dominican. In relation to the United States and the American society he grows up in, the novel portrays the Dominican culture of the diaspora as an "other" in relation to the Western one. In addition, Oscar himself becomes an "other" to the Dominican society: As he does not fulfil the expectations of the Dominican male, he represents a culture unknown to his community. He is thus twice "othered:" first by being Dominican, second by being a nerd. To complicate this further he is also regarded as a stranger in the Dominican Republic, as he is a "postcolonial tourist" visiting his native land.

Oscar's position within both communities can consequently be related to what Homi Bhabha names "the third space." According to Bhabha, "[i]t is a commonplace of plural, democratic societies to say that they can encourage and accommodate cultural diversity" (Bhabha in Rutherford, 208). However, he believes one of the problems with endorsement of cultural diversity to be that there is always a corresponding containment of it (208). In "The Third Space," an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, he states that a transparent norm "is given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that 'these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid'" (208). Bhabha suggests that this is a "*creation* of cultural diversity and *containment* of cultural difference" (208), where the notion of the West, or Western culture, "its liberalism and relativism – these very potent mythologies of 'progress' – also contain a cutting edge, a limit" (209). By focusing on the idea of difference, Bhabha attempts to place himself within "that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness" (209). Hence, within the framework of both Bhabha's "position of liminality" and Nyatetū-Waigwa's "liminal place" the subject is separated, or contained from the society he inhabits. They represent positions where emergence is possible: for Bhabha this is the

emergence of possibilities that reveal themselves through difference, while for Nyatetũ-Waigwa it is the possibility of assimilation to society.

A position of liminality and the construct of culture as otherness as described by Bhabha are also apparent in *Oscar Wao*, and on several levels. Firstly, the novel itself emerges from the third space as Junot Díaz himself holds a position within a Dominican diaspora in the United States. As a representative of *Generation 1.5* he negotiates both Dominican and American cultures and can thus be said to inhabit a position of hybridity. Hybridity is to Bhabha precisely “the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge” (211). It thus provides a space for marginalized groups to narrate their own story in their own manner. Secondly, the story of Oscar Wao itself is also one of liminality, where Oscar’s coming of age must take place between several “moulders.” The comic book genre is relevant also in this context, and especially the reference to “Shazam.” In the comic book *Shazam!* the young boy Billy Batson only needs to utter the word “Shazam” to turn into the superhero Captain Marvel. When Oscar as a very young Casanova wants to date two girls at the same time he pretends that it is not him, but “Shazam:” “At first he pretend[s] that it [i]s his number-one hero who want[s] to date them. But after they agree[] he dropped all pretense [sic]. It wasn’t Shazam – it was Oscar” (14). “Shazam” is an image of self-transformation as it what makes Billy Batson able to alternate between himself as a boy and himself as Captain Marvel; Oscar adopts the image to be able to alternate between his “moulders:” the Dominican and American cultures. Oscar pretends to transform to someone else and “hides” behind “Shazam” until he has accomplished what he wants. He then dares to be himself.

The relationship between the normal Billy Batson and the superbeing Captain Marvel moreover resembles the way Díaz regards the relationship between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Santo Domingo's typical-normal, we think the Third World's commiseration and suffering is normal, and the United States is this superbeing. [...] The joke is you're neither Billy Batson or Captain Marvel, you're basically *shazam!*, you're the word, you're the lightning which transforms, that runs back and forth between them and holds them together, and I think part of this narrative was attempting to write the lightning, because I don't think I could have done anything else, though my special position in life was that (Díaz in Celayo and Shook, 17).

The "lightning" Díaz here describes is the special diasporic position where people alternate between two cultures, and is a position future generations of Dominican-Americans perhaps will continue to have. That Lola's daughter is named Isis is a nod to this. The comic book figure Isis also has the abilities to self-transform: by uttering "I am Isis!" she converts from being a normal girl to a superbeing. However, it is also possible to regard the figure of Isis a hope that future Dominican is able to successfully transform from Dominican to American and back again as they see fit, thus negotiating both cultures.

Even though the American culture is strongly present as a frame for the Dominican diaspora, the Dominican culture might prove to be the more powerful influence in Oscar's formation as his interaction with this is most important to himself. Within the Dominican community, Oscar is expected to fulfil certain criteria in order to earn respect as a Dominican male. In chapter one I quoted Junot Díaz saying that the Dominican-Americans are completely new to their parents, and that they are accepted as long as they conform to what they are expected to. In the same interview with *The Progressive*, he explains exactly what is expected from Dominican males: "As a Dominican man, you're socialized to be a playboy. You spend a lot of time being taught that women are important, but without the really positive framework of why. You figure out quickly it's because of culo (ass)" (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams). The Dominican man is in other words "supposed" to be a womanizer. As the Dominican culture is the strongest influence on Oscar's coming of age, Dominican concepts

of masculinity are perhaps most central to his years of formation, from a little boy through adolescence to young man.

In “Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans: ‘The Dominican Tiger’” Christian Krohn-Hansen says the ideal Dominican man is described as *El tíguere*, and “in order to know the Dominican, one must know the *tíguere*, that magnificent expression of the ‘creole’” (120). Krohn-Hansen sets out to examine how this ideal affects the political situation of the Dominican Republic, but many of his observations concerns the Dominican males in general, and are consequently relevant to the present discussion of Oscar Wao’s negotiation of his role as male as he is growing up. Krohn-Hansen explains how specific ideas of masculinity have been important in the Dominican Republic for a long time, but that the contemporary understanding of what it entails to be *tíguere* were developed during “La Era de Trujillo:” “[O]rdinary men in Santo Domingo, controlled and oppressed by the Trujillo state, forged an image of masculinity that is now put in to use even for the purpose of making sense of the Dominican imagined community – or Dominican national identity” (126). I would say that that this ideal is perhaps even more important in the diaspora as it becomes a vital part of holding on to a sense of “Dominican-ness.”

Krohn-Hansen goes on to identify five categories that Dominican maleness may be discussed in relation to: “notions (1) of *valentía*, or courage; (2) of men’s visibility in public spaces; (3) of the man as seducer and father; (4) of the power tied to a man’s verbal skills; and (5) of a man’s seriousness and sincerity” (112). In other words, in order to be a proper man one must be brave and ready to fight when the situation calls for it. One has to socialize and be visible outside the home, as visibility is regarded as a sign of one’s willingness to do others a favour. One is expected to be a seducer, but at the same time to take care of one’s family. Since power lies within words one has to be eloquent, and last, but not least, one has to be serious. To claim that a man is not serious, is to imply that he is shameless (119).

In *Oscar Wao*, several of the male characters that can be described as *tígueres*, including Abelard and Yuniór, but Oscar is described as quite the opposite:

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 bachatero, 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) (11).

At the novel's outset Oscar does not appear to be particularly courageous. He is not visible in public other than when his mother forces him to leave the house; he prefers to stay inside to read. Except for the period early in his life he is no Dominican seducer, and when it comes to his verbal skills he uses a language that few within his community can relate to, thus he is not regarded as having a quick tongue. On the other hand he is a very serious and sincere young man with a big heart and a strong sense of morality. The moral classification of the *tíguere* is however an ambiguous one as "*tíguere* evokes the notion of a 'trickster'— that is an image of the kind of masculine practice that seems difficult to shape fully as 'order'" (121). The *tíguere* adapts easily to new situations and Krohn-Hansen remarks that "[b]asically, the man who is called a *tíguere* is a man who is cunning, and knows how to survive in his particular environment" (120). Oscar, however, does not demonstrate such abilities as his actions ultimately lead to his death.

The perception of Oscar as a non-typical Dominican male is also enhanced by his nickname. As we recall, Oscar got his nickname from a remark Yuniór made, that "he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde" (180). "Oscar Wao" is the Spanish pronunciation of Oscar Wilde. That he is nicknamed after the homosexual writer is not only a result of his appearance on Halloween, but also his un-Dominican, un-masculine behavior. In "Male Homosexuality and the Construction of Masculinity in Mexico" Annick Prieur examines the image of masculinity in Mexican and other Latin-American cultures. However, some of her

observations can be transposed to cultures with similar ideals of masculinity such as the Dominican Republic. When his fellow Dominican students give Oscar a nickname that alludes to a gay writer their behavior resembles how Mexican men, as Prieur observes, “attack other men’s masculinity by putting them in a passive homosexual role” (83). By coming down on Oscar, the other Dominicans attempt to promote their own masculinity in the manner that for instance Argentinian football supporters do when they offend the other team by representing them as gay:

men’s identity is constructed by underscoring the difference between being a man and being a homosexual, where being a man stands for power, strength, independence and authority. Reducing the other to less than a man, to a homosexual, implies an enhancement of one’s own masculinity, while showing that the other is unable to defend his masculine identity (Prieur, 96).

Oscar gives no attempt to stop the others from using his new nickname, thus he fails to defend his masculinity: “Fool never got mad when we gave him shit. Just sat there with a confused grin on his face” (181). Even though Oscar early in the novel expresses a wish to become more like his Dominican cousins (30), it becomes clear as the story progresses that this desire springs out of a hope that it will make him more attractive to the opposite sex and not because he really wants to conform to the Dominican ways. This is also illustrated by the fact that he makes no attempt to stand up to his fellow students when they call him “Oscar Wao,” he even accepts it, as Yuniur reports: “After a couple of weeks dude started *answering* to it” (180). Oscar refuses to “play the game” which further complicates his formation process: if he simply does not care this part of the Dominican culture comes to play the role of moulder by negation.

Nyatetũ-Waigwa stresses that understanding the nature of place is crucial to understanding the form the educational journey takes. Since Oscar has to relate to different

cultures, to the past and the present, illustrated by the movement between the Dominican Republic and the United States, as well as the juxtaposing narratives of different times, his coming of age is quite intricate. The complexity of several cultures' expectations makes the project of self-formation and its narrative representations harder and more challenging to tell. Therefore, in order for Oscar's story is to be told "truthfully," it has to be fragmented. It shows how Oscar perceives the relationship between his "moulders," as the cultural expectations and unwritten rules of the Dominican and American societies are involved and interrelated. They too, like the texts and presences explored in chapter Two, engage in a dialogue within the narrative thus constituting another palimpsest in the novel. Similar to how a new text emerges through layers of a palimpsest, Oscar constructs his own way through all the "layers" available to him. By choosing bits and pieces from his "moulding cultures," he locates his own path that comes to signify his own rite of passage, which will be explored in more detail shortly.

The story of Oscar consequently progresses from childhood to adulthood. When we first encounter him he is a "preschool loverboy" in the middle of his "Golden Age:" "in those days he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy raised in a 'typical' Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike" (11). It seems to everybody that Oscar is going to become a typical Dominican male. However, in his early adolescence he becomes a "loser with a capital L" (17). Upon reaching high school "he'd become the neighborhood parigüayo [party watcher]. Had none of the High Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it" (19-20). Yuniór continuously compares him to the ideal of *El tíguere*, which is also what Oscar strives to be when he tries to polish up his Dominicanness: he "tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that that in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer" (30).

Particularly in college Oscar experiences his un-Dominicanness as isolating, and attempts to change in order to be accepted by his community. Therefore he does not object when Yunion decides to make him his project. However, as Oscar does not really want to conform to the typical Dominican behavior in order to get a girl, the project fails. Oscar stands up to Yunion and thus defies a “superior” Dominican male, which surprises Yunion: “These days I have to ask myself: What made me angrier? That Oscar, the fat loser, quit, or that Oscar, the fat loser, defied me?” (181). After their falling out, Oscar and Yunion continue to live together, but do not interact. Oscar finds a girl that apparently likes him for who he is, but it turns out that she does not share Oscar affections and again he gets his heart broken. This time he takes it harder than ever before and tries to kill himself. During his recovery he tells Yunion that “[i]t was the curse that made me do it, you know” (194). When Oscar starts to learn about his past, and becomes aware of the “Doom of the Cabrals” he is convinced that he too is cursed, and that this is the reason for all his problems.

After graduating college Oscar moves back home to Paterson. It is not a good time for him and he is turning into “an old bitter dork” (268). He realizes that a new generation of nerds has taken over the Game Room and that role playing cards is no longer the big thing. He is not unwilling, but rather unable to adapt to the new era: “First sign that his Age was coming to a close. When the latest nerdery was no longer compelling, when you preferred the old to the new” (270). With this shift in “nerdery” Oscar no longer has a natural place within the “nerd community.” This leads him to further isolation from society as the marginalized community of nerds has, throughout his adolescence and coming of age, provided Oscar with a sense of home and safety. His dreaming of superheroes belongs to a fictional world that does not help in his formation; however, his socializing and interaction with other nerds does.

After a couple of years in Paterson Oscar returns “home” to the Dominican Republic with the rest of his family. When it is time to return to the United States Oscar decides to

prolong his stay with La Inca. She respects Oscar's way and lets him stay in the house to write instead of making him go out with his cousins. When he is finally allowed to be himself he meets and falls in love with "a semiretired puta. Her name was Ybón Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his *real* life" (279).

As mentioned above, the protagonist in the traditional *Bildungsroman* is often faced with making a choice that marks a rite of passage. When Oscar falls in love with Ybón and decides to pursue her this leads him down a path that comes to represent his own rite of passage. However, this is not one explicitly pertaining to the Dominican community, but a rite of passage that Oscar imagines and creates for himself through the "layers" available to him. It is apparent early in the novel that for Oscar his journey of formation is interrelated with girls, and whether it is because of sex or love, to get a girlfriend is one of the most important things in his life. To him, it represents becoming an adult, a man, perhaps even a *tíguere*, and it appears that, together with his Genres¹⁷, nothing else matters.

When Oscar meets Ybón he finally meets someone who responds to his emotions. When she kisses him one night she is drunk, she gives nurture to his hope for love. He clings on to this hope, and even though he is almost killed in the sugarcane field he does not let her go. He becomes obsessed with having her, and blames it on the curse: "It's the ancient powers, Oscar said grimly. They won't leave me alone" (315). However, in one way it appears that his obsession is not about Ybón any longer. It seems that to Oscar, it becomes a matter of finding someone, anyone, who would return his emotions, and help him fulfill his self-created rite of passage.

After the incident in the cane field Belicia and La Inca interrupt Oscar's journey and sends him back to the United States to keep him safe. When he is fully recovered he returns to

¹⁷ "Genres" refers to all the different types of genres, typically of self-transformation, that Oscar is interested in (including comic books, science fiction, anime, and manga, etc).

the Dominican Republic where he spends twenty-seven days chasing Ybón. He writes her letters and visits her at work, which only scares her and has her boyfriend threaten him. His family flies in from the United States to convince him to come back with them, but he refuses. His persistence pays off, however. Towards the end of the twenty-seven days Ybón and Oscar go away together: “For one whole weekend they hid out on some beach in Baharona while the capitán was away on “business,” and guess what? Ybón actually *kissed* him. Guess what else? Ybón actually *fucked* him” (334). What Oscar dreams of finally happens. But the intimacies he shares with Ybón turns out to be more important to him than the sex itself:

The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a little girl and him telling her that he’d been a virgin all his life. He wrote that he couldn’t believe that he had to wait for this so goddamn long. (Ybón was the one who suggested calling the wait something else. Yeah, like what? Maybe, she said, you could call it life.) (334-35).

Oscar has given love so much significance that he does not believe that his life has started before he has experienced it. In other words, when Ybón gives Oscar a taste of love this is basically what makes his life worth living. Junot Díaz talks of love in a similar manner:

I always feel like this world we live in is so incredibly difficult. And it doesn’t give a shit. Yet, despite its mechanical uncaringness, it’s a gift—we didn’t do anything to get this life. I have no sense of anything beyond this, so that’s the hardest thing to wrestle with. Love is the only thing—I don’t want to say that “makes it bearable”—but I feel like without the possibility of love, this place would just devour us. Honestly, connecting once at the deepest level with someone, you know, once you’ve done that, even if your life goes to hell, man, it was really worth living (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams).

This feeling is so strong with Oscar that now that he has experienced love he can die happy. Throughout the novel his desperate need to find a woman can be seen as a desperate need to reach adulthood: to get a girl becomes Oscar’s personal “Shazam.” He believes that in the

same way the boy Billy Batson can exclaim *Shazam!* and become Captain Marvel, the man, the boy Oscar, can have love and become Oscar, the man. To love, and be loved, is his “lightning” that transforms him. Therefore, he holds on to the one woman who reciprocates his feelings: If he does not get to experience love he might as well die. That the intimacies turns out to be more important to Oscar than the sexual act itself, can be conceived as a realization of a need to be seen and recognized for who he is. Also, to be a part of the innermost life of a human being is a new and eye-opening experience to the young man who has felt isolated for the most parts of his life.

Oscar’s desperation can, however, also be read as a fear of becoming stuck within the liminal place. From his adolescence he has felt isolated from society. Upon reaching adulthood he hopes to be reincorporated in the Dominican society, which he as a young Casanova had his place in. However, this requires him to adapt to the ideal of the Dominican male, which he previously refused to do. This might still have happened if he had not been killed, and through his pursuit of Ybón he chooses not only love, but death as well. However, before he is shot he displays several of the qualities of the *tíguere*. In addition to his already existing sincerity he finds his courage and gift of tongue:

This time Oscar didn’t cry when they drove him back to the canefields [...] They walked him into the cane and then turned him around. He tried to stand bravely [...] They looked at Oscar and he looked at them and then he started to speak. The words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once (320-21).

Ybón’s love has transformed Oscar, and love comes thus to stand as the point of completion of his self-created rite of passage. This would indicate that Oscar does find a way out of liminality by choosing his own way and not conforming to Dominican or American cultures. As Nyatetũ-Waigwa points out, completion of the rite of passage need not entail accommodation with society. It can be the moment when the protagonist is “equipped to

choose an individual stance in life” (Nyatetũ-Waigwa, 1). However, as completing his ritual kills Oscar, a question that consequently rises is whether one’s own path is a viable solution. Perhaps in order to master coming of age, Oscar must either choose to adapt to one of the cultures’ ways, or in a near superhero way be able to master both. One can only speculate whether Oscar would have been able to be reincorporated into society had he lived.

When Oscar chooses his own way, ignoring the unwritten rules and expectations of his societies, he resists emerging “*along with the world*” (Bakhtin 1986b, 23). However, as it is difficult, if not impossible, for someone in an in-between position to fully assimilate to one of his cultures; even harder, to comply with a double set of expectations, he would have had to turn to his hyphenated culture in order to be integrated. Because of Oscar’s past, his Dominican history, it becomes impossible for him to become American, and due to the fact that he grows up in the United States and per se is American, it is impossible for him to become Dominican. He is permanently on the threshold.

Conclusion

Oscar Wao can be thought of as a web where all the strands leading to Oscar's life, and death, have to be disentangled, then looked at and appreciated. This is what the various chapters have done from different theoretical frameworks.

In the Introduction I present Junot Díaz through a brief overview of his life and work. As pointed out, his fictional works draw on autobiographical elements, particularly those related to his immigrant experience. Further I included a rather elaborate summary of the novel in order to discuss it freely throughout the chapters. As the notion of diaspora is a dominant trope in the novel I also explore traditional uses of the term in the Introduction. This is done in order to have the more general contexts in mind when I examine the specificities of the Dominican diaspora in Chapter One.

Chapter One explores the particularities of the contemporary Dominican diaspora, and diasporic experience, in relation to *Oscar Wao*. Diaspora being the dominant trope in the novel, I argue that the novel itself explores the diasporic experience of the characters living in Dominican-American society in the United States, and how these experiences manifest themselves differently to each character. I suggest that the experiences of Belicia differ from those of her children, but I also indicate that Lola and Oscar have very different experiences despite belonging to the same generation.

The diaspora in *Oscar Wao* figures along with the fukú, the curse that haunts the New World, which I also take a closer look at in Chapter One. As it is not clarified whether or not the fukú is real, Yuniór plays with the ambiguity of the image and portrays events as they might or might not be caused by the curse. Despite this uncertainty, it is real to the characters who believe in it. It provides a way of explaining events in their lives, particularly those

which are to their disfavour. The fukú constitutes a part of the characters' cultural baggage as it in the fictitious world of the novel can be traced back to the *Presence Africaine*. Thus, I suggest that the characters cannot escape or lift it. As Yunior says: "no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you" (5). I furthermore touch on differing perceptions of notions of home, as Oscar and Ybón, for instance, do not agree on where his home is. Another aspect of the novel I address in Chapter One is Yunior's history telling. He re-tells history by using his imagination to fill in gaps caused by the amnesia that was common in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo era. Some of the characters contribute to the re-telling of the past, and as these occupy different positions of the diaspora, or like La Inca, does not have a place within it, the narrative conveys different positions of enunciation.

Chapter Two engages in a further exploration of the three presences to which the Caribbean cultural identities can be related: *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Europeenne*, and *Presence Americain*. For different reasons all of the presences have come to co-exist in the Caribbean sphere. I borrow the ideas of "host" and "ghost" from performance theory in order to describe more precisely how they are interrelated: *Presence Americain* is the "host" that is haunted by the ghosts of *Presence Africaine*, and *Presence Europeenne*. I thus argue that these presences constitute what we can think of as a cultural palimpsest in the Caribbean.

Furthermore in Chapter Two I examine how the novel itself reflects this kind of layered texture as it also creates a palimpsest through the presence of other texts and their intertextual relations. The main focus of the chapter is the exploration of the novel's two epigraphs: a quotation from the American comic the *Fantastic Four* and the second stanza of the poem "The Schooner *Flight*" by Caribbean author Derek Walcott. I suggest that these two epigraphs are representations of two different world views, anticipating the ambiguity of the Old and the New that is apparent throughout the novel. They stand to represent the positions of enunciation Dominican-Americans speak from when they negotiate both cultures. The

theoretical point of departure of my argument is Julia Kristeva's description of intertextuality; however I also rely on Bakhtin as his dialogism provides a more fruitful framework for the exploration of this particular novel. Díaz demonstrates intentional intertextuality, as he chooses the textual fragments interspersed in the narrative in order to engage in a dialogue with both the readers and the different presences of the Caribbean. The novel is consequently an example of Bakhtin's proposition that literature is generated in relation to other structures. Together with the epigraphs the multiple, other textual fragments constitute an aesthetical palimpsest of texts that also refers to and deepen different world views. These differently constructed palimpsests in *Oscar Wao* make evident that culture is, and remains, as Bakhtin argues, an inseparable part of literature.

Chapter Three deals with how *Oscar Wao* negotiates the *Bildungsroman* genre. I explore the traditional denotations, as well as the contemporary uses of the term, which come to include stories of a character's coming-of-age like *Oscar Wao*. As this particular story of coming-of-age reflects a complex, contemporary society, a revised framework is necessary. I therefore explore Nyatetū-Waigwa's model of the liminal novel, as Oscar inhabits a liminal position in his societies. The main focus of the chapter is Oscar's complicated process of emergence. By inhabiting a position in-between the Dominican and American cultures his "moulders" are consequently two different cultures with different expectations, traditions, and values. In addition, the co-existence of these two also means that they are changing simultaneously, thus making navigation within and between them even more challenging. The Dominican ideals of masculinity play a particularly important part of this as Oscar is constantly compared to the ideal of the Dominican *tíguere*. However, I argue that Oscar refuses to conform to either Dominican or American cultures, but creates his own path through all the "layers" available to him. This path comes to signify his own personal rite of passage, which ultimately leads him to his death, leaving him permanently on the threshold.

The simultaneous existence of the Old World and the New World comes to be defining in the novel as it complicates the situation for the dispersed populations. As we have seen Díaz describes his own experience as follows: “I always lived in a situation of simultaneity. It’s like a science fiction book where an alien or creature of an artefact exists on two worlds, or on two different planets at one time. They’re not fixed in one place. They phase in and out” (Díaz in Valerio-Holguín, 8).

Such a phasing in and out also illustrates well what emerges from this discussion of *Oscar Wao*, namely a constant oscillation between worlds, cultures, places, spaces, languages, and ideas of self. The three presences; *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Europeenne*, and *Presence American*, are echoed in the occurrences of intertextuality, palimpsesting, and finally in Oscar’s own process of *Bildung*, that is to say, his journey toward finding himself takes place as an oscillation between all these different influences.

This oscillation is furthermore present structurally through the very construction of the novel. The chapters that tell the story of Oscar’s life are interrupted by chapters narrating the story of his family members. Strikingly, the temporal movement of these stories goes in opposite directions: Oscar’s story moves forwards and is narrated chronologically from we encounter him at the age of seven until he ends his life as a young adult. The story of his family, however, moves backwards in time, each “interruption” of Oscar’s story reaching further back than the previous, from Lola via Belicia to Abelard. Each of the fragments from the past reveals more of the history that defines the present. Even though the temporal movement leads the stories away from each other, the interweaving, and the palimpsest that serve as a narrative principle holds it all together. In this manner the structure of the novel also displays the oscillation between here and there, and past and present.

In the novel, Oscar himself becomes an image of the oscillation. As “Shazam” he is the “lightning” that alternates between Dominican and American cultures, holding the worlds together. It is a position he cannot escape, however which he seeks refuge from in genres of self-transformation. They transcend what is considered normal in, what for them is, a completely natural way. The Genres present easily recognized metaphors or images, and come to mean so much to Oscar exactly because they are neat, easy and therefore a relief from the blurriness and confusion of the layers he is both part of and that surrounds him. The visual of the comic book furthermore figures as a bridge between the Dominican and American cultures as the images can be “read” by everybody.

As demonstrated, the story of *Oscar Wao* moves back and forth in times and between different places throughout the novel. Set both in the United States and the Dominican Republic, the novel displays the relationship between the Old World and the New World as geographical places as well as representatives of the past and the present in a diasporic world view. The notion of diaspora holds a special place thematically in the novel, as the cultural framework we encounter in *Oscar Wao* is that of the Dominican diaspora in the United States. The diasporic position the characters inhabit places them between the Dominican and American cultures. This in-between position has served as a point of departure for explorations concerning different features of the novel.

However, several issues could have been explored further. I briefly mention how Lola is successful in navigating in the multicultural United States, not only between the Dominican and the American cultures, but also in relation to other diasporic communities. Echoing Prabhu’s description of creolization, Lola “direct[s] [her] energies toward interaction and new connections in the present” (5) as her focus is on the life she leads in the United States.

Compared to Oscar, Lola's life in-between the Dominican and American cultures is made more complicated through her gender and her relationship with her mother. While I would have liked to look more closely at the relationship between all of the main characters in *Oscar Wao*, I am especially interested in that between the female characters. One might find a similar connection between La Inca, Belicia, and Lola to that of the special bond between Díaz' own mother and sisters he describes in the interview with *The Progressive*: "They were shackled together in ways I wasn't" (Díaz in Lantigua-Williams). The wording Díaz uses alludes to how slaves were shackled together, indicating that they are held together by history, making it difficult, or even impossible for them to escape or break the bonds. It is the traditions of the old that shackle Lola and to some extent keep her from enjoying freely the new.

To narrate a complex experience like the one of the Dominican-American immigrant in a "true" manner poses great challenges. There are multiple presences and influences to consider, and past haunts present in the way that, metaphorically speaking, the fukú does. The complexity of the situation is in *Oscar Wao* illustrated through the complexity of the narrative structure. However, the Caribbean situation has always been complicated. In *What the Twilight Says* Derek Walcott contemplates on how Antillean art displays a reassembling of cultural and historical fragments as follows:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments [...] Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent (Walcott 1998, 69).

Walcott describes here what Díaz has done in a complicated, contemporary context with *Oscar Wao*. If we adopt Walcott's image of the vase, we can say that whereas Walcott would glue the pieces of the one vase into its original shape, Díaz takes pieces from several broken vases with different shapes, colours, and patterns, and glues them all together to one new vase, in this case, a story.

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