

ARTICLES

RECOVERING AND REDEFINING BLACKNESS IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

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In the first of many footnotes that populate Junot Díaz's 2007 Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the primary narrator Yunior provides historical context for the next 300 pages of narrative. "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1920 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality" (Díaz 2007a, 2). With this opening statement, Yunior identifies the reader as an American who, most likely, learned very little about Caribbean (to say nothing of Dominican) history in school. He ends the footnote with this characteristically sarcastic statement:

Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the longest, most damaging U.S. backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and the argentinos are still appealing); the creation of the first modern kleptocracy (Trujillo was Mobutu before Mobutu was Mobutu); the systematic bribing of American senators; and, last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do). (Díaz 2007a, 2)

As Monica Hanna (502) and Sean O'Brien (84) have noted, in the first pages of the novel, Yunior establishes a relationship with a presumably U.S.-based reader who needs to be schooled both in Dominican history and in the United States' complicity in totalitarian regimes around the world. Although the novel has found worldwide acclaim (including in his

native country of the Dominican Republic¹), Díaz writes for an American readership that may have a limited understanding of the history of people of African descent in Latin America and operate within a binary black-white paradigm of race. Díaz thus engages in a twofold project of recovery and redefinition that can be appreciated by a variety of readers but is aimed an American audience.

Broadly speaking, the novel is preoccupied with truth, erasure, and history, and one of Díaz's historiographic concerns is bearing witness to the ways in which blackness has been repressed and denigrated in the Dominican Republic. He critiques this pervasive Negrophobia through two central characters, Oscar and his mother, Beli, both of whom are seen as tainted by their family and community because of their African phenotypes. Oscar and Beli's link to Africa is also suggested through the recurring figure of the mongoose, who appears at crucial moments in each character's life in the novel. A small but fierce animal originally from Africa and Asia but brought to the Caribbean to control the rodent population, the mongoose's journey parallels the trek of Africans to the Americas as early as the fifteenth century. The presence of the animal in the novel also underscores the ways in which Oscar and Beli (and all Dominicans) are children of the African Diaspora.

Intertwined with this recovery of blackness in the novel is a redefinition of it. Díaz writes against a collective tendency in the United States to see "black" and "Latino" as two mutually exclusive identities and instead borrows from Latin American constructions of race as a fluid identity that is inflected by blood, phenotype, and socioeconomic class. In particular, Díaz's use of specifically Dominican racialized terms to describe characters and his narrator's use of the word "nigger" juxtaposes two different understandings of race in general and blackness in particular. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* not only lays bare the ways in which, as Silvio Torres-Saillant asserts, "Dominican society is the cradle of blackness in the Americas," but the novel also demonstrates how blackness itself is heterogeneous, dynamic, and geographically and temporally contingent (Torres-Saillant 1995, 110). Thus, writing for a primarily U.S. audience, Díaz uses a Dominican-American narrator to highlight both the similarities and differences between Dominican and American attitudes towards blackness as a racial category.

Díaz's epic novel revolves around the title character, whose given name is Oscar de Leon but is nicknamed Oscar Wao (a Spanish speaker's mispronunciation of the famous aesthete Oscar Wilde). A Dominican-

¹ In a 2010 interview, Díaz said that most Dominicans haven't read the book but are "just happy for the existence of the book, happy that a Dominican-York, a Dominican immigrant kid in New Jersey was recognized for work about the Dominican Republic, sort of the nationalist pride" (Moreno 2010, 535).

American teenager living in New Jersey in the late 20th century and desperately searching for love and acceptance, Oscar is also a science fiction and fantasy aficionado who has trouble fitting in with his peers, especially the main narrator, Yunior, who is a “closet”² sci-fi nerd but outwardly epitomizes womanizing machismo. Yet the novel itself focuses not just on Oscar, but on his rebellious older sister Lola, and his mother, Beli, who grew up during Trujillo’s 31-year reign of terror in the Dominican Republic. The novel shifts back and forth in time and place, moving from mid-century Dominican Republic to late 20th-century United States, as the characters attempt to reconcile ostensibly binary oppositions such as past and present, myth and history, self and nation.

Understanding the history of blackness in the Dominican Republic helps to frame the novel’s discussion of race and identity. Anthropologist Juan Rodriguez has determined through mitochondrial-DNA evidence that 85 percent of Dominicans have African heritage, 9.4 percent have Indian heritage, and less than .08 percent have European heritage (Gates, Jr. 2011, 122). Yet in a recent federal census, 82 percent of Dominicans self-identified as Indio, while only 4.13 percent identified as black (Gates, Jr. 2011, 122). Indio was a term implemented during the Trujillo regime that functions, in the words of Ginetta E.B. Candelario, as “a neutral, ‘un-marked’ term” that affirms both “Dominican whiteness” and “non-blackness” (Candelario 2007, 19). This denial of African ancestry among many Dominicans has many complex roots, but it stems largely from the Dominican Republic’s attempt to define itself in stark contrast to Haiti, its neighbor to the west, a black country that was established in 1804 by formerly enslaved people. When the Dominican Republic asserted its independence from Haiti in 1844, a central aspect of the creation of a strong national identity was the rejection of all things Haitian, a rejection that often manifested as negrophobia. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it: “They cast off Haitian culture, its language, its ideas – and to a certain degree, its color. Haiti was black, so suddenly black was no good” (Gates, Jr., 2011, 138). One particularly brutal expression of this anti-Black sentiment was the massacre of roughly 15,000³ Haitians, Haitian-Dominicans, and Dominicans of Haitian descent in 1937, ordered by the infamous dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, himself a skin-whitening mulato who had a Haitian grandmother (Gates, Jr. 2011, 142). This anti-Haitian and anti-black sentiment was central to Trujillo’s regime, as “it concocted the hitherto loose and unorganized ideas of antihaitianismo into a full-fledged ideology that perceived Haitians as inferior beings,

² T.S. Miller refers to Yunior as a “one-time closet nerd” (Miller 2011, 95).

³ According to Ernesto Sagás, “[o]ther estimates of the number of dead range from 1,000 to 35,000” (Sagás 2000, 46). Frank Moya Pons puts the number at 18,000 (Moya Pons 1998, 368).

enemies of the Dominican nation” (Sagás 2000, 45). While the immediate aid that Dominicans offered to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake is a hopeful sign of renewed relations between the two countries, negrophobic and anti-Haitian sentiment in Dominican communities continues to this day (Gates, Jr. 2011, 145). In September 2013, the Constitutional Court in the Dominican Republic passed a ruling stipulating that people born in the Dominican Republic to Haitian parents (most of them children of migrant workers in the DR’s canefields) as early as 1929 could be stripped of both Dominican and Haitian citizenship and rendered stateless.⁴ In response to negative international outcry, the Dominican Republic passed another law, 169-14, in May 2014, which grants citizenship to “children born to foreign parents. . . provided they have Dominican government identification documents and are in the civil registry” (Archibold 2014). Although “advocates for Haitian migrants and their children” have praised the ruling, it remains to be seen how effectively and fairly the law will be implemented (Archibold 2014).

Much of the scholarship on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* engages with the multiple discourses that populate the text. Part of the challenge (and the charm) of the novel stems from Díaz’ ability to blend references to American popular culture, Dominican history, the literary Western canon, fantasy and science fiction literature, and comics. The inclusion of such wide-ranging allusions inheres the use of numerous linguistic registers, a gesture that “leave[s] no core audience, authentic relation, or ideal readership to which any one group can lay claim” (Díaz 2007a, 41). Although the frequent code-switching in the novel seems to function as an exclusionary tool, Graulund argues that the text’s multiple registers actually “break up the crude dichotomy of ‘us and ‘them’. . . by ensuring that no one group retains the right or the mastery of text that clearly never can be said to operate in any one register for very long” (Díaz 2007a, 39). While Ashley Kunsu’s 2014 article “History, Hair, and Reimagining Racial Categories in Junot Díaz’ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” does not focus on an implied audience, instead examining how hair “operates as an important site for racial conceptualizing,” one of the byproducts of her discussion is the idea that “Díaz disrupts the

⁴ Although Dominican-born Haitians have been eligible for Dominican citizenship since 1929, a 1999 report from the “human rights commission of the Organization of American States” nevertheless indicated that “most children of Haitian parents are denied Dominican citizenship” (Danticat and Díaz 1999). As Haitian-American writer Danticat Edwidge and Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz state in their 1999 *New York Times* piece, the sugar industry in the Dominican Republic since the mid-twentieth century has relied on cheap labor from Haitians, who often “live in isolated work camps, or bateys, near the fields, usually in makeshift shacks with no electricity, no running water and no medical care” (Danticat and Díaz 1999). Disdain for Haitians is ingrained in the rhetoric of politicians in the Dominican Republic who use Haitians as “scapegoats for the country’s inflation an unemployment problems” (Danticat and Díaz 1999).

usual means we have for locating ourselves and others and substitutes an understanding of racial categories that are in constant flux and subject always to revision” (Kunsa 2013, 219, 213). I agree with Kunsa that the novel destabilizes readers’ understanding of race, but I focus on how the text grapples with the particular racial category of blackness, ultimately arguing that the Díaz recovers a deliberately erased African diasporic history and redefines the terms of blackness for an American audience.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz writes with an intimate understanding of the complex and deep-seated racial politics in the Dominican Republic while also affirming the African roots of Dominican people. He begins the novel with this arresting sentence: “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” (Díaz 2007a, 1). The narrator, Yunior, plunges the reader into the trauma of Middle Passage and the horrors of the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas as he discusses the curse that lies at heart of Dominican History: FUKÚ. Yunior describes fukú as “a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (Díaz 2007a, 1). Indeed, Díaz’s evocation of the Dominican Republic as the symbol of colonial oppression in the New World is grounded in historical fact. The conquest of the Taino people of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and ten years later, Spain authorized the transport of black slaves to the island, thus “marking the start of the black experience in the western hemisphere” (Torres-Saillant 1995, 110). The term fukú, which remains central to Dominican folklore to this day, comes from West Africa. Díaz stated in a 2008 interview with NPR’s Terry Gross: “It’s like one of these Nigerian words that we got thanks to four or five hundred years of slavery” (Díaz 2007b). Fukú refers not only to the curse of colonialism that impacts all of Díaz’s characters in the novel but it is also an embodiment of the “mystical and spiritual force of the enslaved Africa” (Boyd 2010, 3). Díaz establishes the connection to Africa in the very first sentence of the novel, reminding the reader that slavery existed throughout the Americas. In fact, by one estimate, “90 percent of African slaves were imported into the Caribbean and South America” (Mintz 2017).

The characters of Oscar and his mother, Beli, embody this link to Africa. Both characters are teased, marginalized, and/or scapegoated because they are dark-skinned. Oscar is relentlessly teased for being overweight, nerdy, and black. Yunior, the novel’s primary narrator, describes Oscar’s first semester at Rutgers, where he hoped he “would find someone like him. That, alas didn’t happen. The white kids looked at his black

skin and his afro and treated him with unhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he'd say, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy" (Díaz 2007a, 49). Marginalized by the white kids because he looks black and teased by the kids of color because he does not walk or talk like a "real" Dominican, Oscar's blackness negatively marks him. And after spending a summer with his grandmother in sunny Santo Domingo, Oscar's uncle greets him at the airport with the following words: "Great, his tio said, looking askance at his complexion, now you look Haitian" (Díaz 2007a, 217). The term renders that person racially and nationally inferior. Yuniór expresses disbelief that Lola, Oscar's sister, would want to spend time with Oscar: "Unlike me, who would have hidden from a Caliban like that, she loved the dork. Invited him to parties and other rallies. Holding up signs handing out flyers. Her fat-ass assistant" (Díaz 2007a, 170-1). While Yuniór does not explicitly mention Oscar's darker skin in this passage, instead focusing on his obese body and awkward social skills, the comparison he draws between Oscar and Caliban is certainly racialized. The dark-skinned monstrous figure of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban represents the national, racial, physical, and linguistic Other that needs to be contained. Yet Caliban ultimately transcends his degradation by learning the language his master has taught him, as he says: "You taught me language; and my profit on't /Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!" (I. ii. 517-519). Oscar, too, masters language to weave his own tales that blend comics, science fiction, and fantasy and that allow him to escape the humiliation that he suffers from nearly everyone around him. Words facilitate Oscar's escape from a reality in which he is defamed because his skin is too black, his hair is too kinky, his body is too heavy, and his virgin status makes him less of a man.

Oscar's long-suffering mother, Beli, is also negatively marked by her blackness. Beli, who is born right after her father has been tortured by Trujillo's thugs and sentenced to years in a fetid Dominican prison because he allegedly slandered the dictator, is seen as an omen by her family. Yuniór describes the reaction to her birth:

The family claims the first sign was that Abelard's third and final daughter, given the light early on in her father's capsulization, was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black – kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack – and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. That's the kind of culture I

belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen. (Díaz 2007a, 248)

In a nation where the vast majority of citizens have African ancestry, the birth of a black-skinned baby is an unfortunate event. Here the narrator laments the negrophobia of his people, using enumeration and repetition to emphasize that Beli's skin is a shade of black that cannot be mitigated. These are just two examples of many that highlight Díaz's awareness of the problematic, divisive, and often hypocritical rejection of blackness within Dominican and Dominican American communities. However, it is important to acknowledge that this kind of colorism is not unique to Dominicans. One of the characteristics of the African diasporic subject is internalized self-hatred that results from colonial oppression and institutionalized racism. As Díaz put it in a 2007 conversation with Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat: "[I]nstead of insisting that Dominican 'black denial' is a pathology unique to Dominicans, I try to foreground the Dominican example in order to explore how general and pernicious this is throughout the African Diaspora" (Danticat and Díaz 2007, 95). The preference for light skin permeates many black American communities today.⁵ Indeed, when Yuniór refers to the "culture [he] belong[s] to," he may just as easily be referring to American culture as to Dominican culture.

Like Oscar, Beli is ostracized by her peers because of her blackness. Wei, the Chinese girl at El Redentor, where she attended high school, who was initially "scourged. . . with all the usual anti-Asian nonsense" by her Dominican classmates, points out Beli's darker complexion: "But even Wei had some choice words for Beli. You black, she said, fingering Beli's thin forearm. *Black-black*" (Díaz 2007a, 84). While Wei's comment could be seen more as a casual observation and less as a vicious comment about her skin color, it nevertheless demonstrates that Beli's blackness is a defining characteristic for her peers. Yuniór notes that this contributed to her inability to fit in: "She would never admit it (even to herself), but she felt utterly exposed at El Redentor, all those pales eyes gnawing at her duskiness like locusts – and she didn't know how to handle such vulnerability" (Díaz 2007a, 83). Yet another example of Beli's marginalization because of her skin color is the uproar that ensues when Beli is caught having sex with Jack Pujols, a fair-skinned pretty boy from a wealthy and prominent family. The scandal that follows stems from Beli being the wrong color and the wrong socioeconomic class:

Factor in that he'd been caught not with one of his own class (though that might also have been a problem), but

⁵ See Kathy Russell-Cole, Midge Wilson, and Ronald E. Hall 2013.

with a scholarship girl, *una prieta*⁶ to boot. (The fucking of poor *prietas* was considered standard operating procedure for elites just as long as it was kept on the do-lo, what is elsewhere called the Strom Thurmond Maneuver). (Díaz 2007a, 100)

Here Yunior illustrates the ways in which skin color and class are intertwined in Latin American conceptions of race and highlights the centuries-old tradition of powerful white men discreetly having sex with darker-skinned women on the side. Yunior notes an example from recent U.S. history when he coins the “Strom Thurmond Maneuver.” Strom Thurmond, a U.S. Senator from South Carolina who served for 47 years and “ran for president on a segregationist platform,” had an affair when he was 22 with a 16-year-old African -American woman maid who worked in his family’s home (Yardley 2013). The affair resulted in the birth of a biracial child whom Senator Thurmond financially supported but “never publicly acknowledged” (Yardley 2013). Yunior’s invocation of Thurmond while describing Jack Pujols’ rejection of Beli appeals to the average American reader who is, most likely, familiar with such “maneuvers” and places Jack’s behavior within a larger historical context.

Díaz represents Oscar and Beli’s connection to blackness (and to each other) through their association with the figure of the mongoose, an animal that was imported to the Caribbean to contain the rodent population. The mongoose appears at three crucial junctures in the novel, functioning as a guardian during times of distress: during Beli’s beating by Trujillo’s minions, during Oscar’s suicide attempt three decades later, and right after Oscar’s beating in a Dominican canefield. It is a mysterious, supernatural figure that thrusts the novel into the realm of magical realism and symbolizes Oscar and Beli’s physical and cultural dislocation. In one of his ubiquitous footnotes throughout the book, Díaz describes how the mongoose was taken from its native homeland and charged with surviving in a new environment:

The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to another India, aka the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record — 675 BCE, in a nameless scribe’s letter to Ashurbanipal’s father, Esarhaddon — the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Be-

⁶ According to Daysi Josefina Guzmán, “prieto” (or “prieta” in the feminine form) is one of the racial types that falls under the racial category of “black” (cited in Candelario 2007 16).

lieved to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed. (Díaz 2007a,15)

In his typical blend of history, science-fiction references, and wit, Díaz traces the journey of the mongoose and identifies him as an ally of the oppressed, which may explain why he is so closely associated with Oscar and Beli, two of the most long-suffering characters in the novel. Beli's exile from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey embodies that cultural and physical displacement. And though Oscar is American-born, he is haunted by the ghosts of his family's past in the Dominican Republic. These two characters, who are exclusively associated with the mongoose figure in the novel, represent the push and pull of diaspora, the attempt to adapt to a new environment while maintaining a connection to one's roots. Both characters also happen to have the dark skin that marks them as "Other" even within their own communities and thus symbolically connects them to the deep black hide of the African mongoose.

In addition to recovering this link to Africa through Oscar, Beli, and the mongoose, Díaz also urges a reconsideration of blackness particularly for audiences in the United States where blackness signifies very differently than it does in the Dominican Republic and the rest of Latin America. While the United States still largely operates along a white-black racial axis according to the one-drop rule (one "drop" of black "blood" makes one black), Latin America functions according to a complex color caste system. Despite the growing population of Americans who identify as multiracial, there is still a tendency to see racial categories as discrete and absolute in the United States. The logic of hypodescent (which "mean[s] that "racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group") remains strong – so strong that former President Barack Obama is nearly always referred to (and usually refers to himself) as black, even though he is the son of a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya (Davis 2001, 5). As F. James Davis points out, this "American cultural definition of black is taken for granted as readily as by judges, affirmative action officers, and black protestors as it is by Ku Klux Klansmen" (Davis 2001, 5). The one-drop rule is unique to black American identity, as "no other ethnic population in the nation, including those with visibly non-caucasoid features," are enumerated in this way; in fact, the one-drop rule "is found only in the United States and not in any other nation in the world" (Davis 2001, 13).

However, in Latin America, race, and blackness in particular, is constructed in very different terms, and the language used to describe people racially reflects that understanding. Broadly speaking, in Latin America, "the color designation applied to a family or person depends

more on the place on the class ladder than on racial traits. Race influences class placement, but it is only one factor and it may be overcome" (Davis 2001, 99). As has been the case for many decades, "[e]ven though the Dominican people are overwhelmingly mulatto, the upper classes are mostly light-skinned, while the lower-classes tend to be dark-skinned" (Sagás 2000, 65). According to linguist Daysi Josefina Guzmán, there are at least twenty-two "categorical racial terms that fall into five major racial groups" in the Dominican Republic (cited in Candelario 2007, 16). When teaching Díaz's novel, I show this table to my mostly American-raised students, and many are astounded by the number of racialized categories that exists within one nation. The novel, which moves fluidly between Dominican and American worldviews, thus forces readers to reconsider their own ethnocentric understandings of racial identities.

Although Díaz uses Spanish words and phrases liberally throughout the novel, not all readers who are fluent in Spanish will understand all of his references. Yuniór, in particular, uses many slang words that would be familiar only to a person who had spent time in Dominican or Dominican-American communities. Some of these regionally specific words refer to a character's skin color and physical features. This nuanced racial vocabulary of the DR exists alongside the black-and-white racial rhetoric of the United States in the world of the novel. In addition to using words like "black" and "white" to indicate skin color, Díaz also includes many descriptive racial terms that are specific to the Dominican Republic, such as "trigüño," "jabao," "mulato," "moreno," "prieto," and "cocolo" (Díaz 2007a, 28). The last three terms fall under the "black" category in Guzmán's chart of Dominican racial categories, and they appear more frequently in the novel than the first three. Given the Negrophobia that Díaz depicts in Dominican and Dominican-American communities in the novel, it is not surprising that those at the black end of the spectrum are described more frequently (and often in a negative light). "Prieto/a" occurs nine times in the novel, and seven of those instances refer to Beli, the youngest daughter of Abelard Cabral and the mother of Oscar and Lola, who is "cursed" with black skin. For example, Yuniór says that when Beli begins flirting with a much older man known as the Gangster, the community dismisses her in no uncertain terms: "In the minds of Beli's neighbors, that prieta comparona had finally found her true station in life, as a cuero" (Díaz 2007a, 127). Beli is not just a woman who thinks she's better than everyone else (comparona) and a whore (cuero), but she is a *black* (prieta) stuck-up whore. Lola, Beli's daughter and Oscar's sister, who is dark but not as dark as Beli and Oscar, understands that others negatively mark her blackness: "The puer-torican kids on the block couldn't stop laughing when they saw my hair,

they called me Blacula” (Díaz 2007a, 54). Lola later appropriates the word used so often to describe her mother when telling Yunior that she may be black but she’s not dumb: “Yo soy prieta, Yuni, she said, pero no soy bruta. Knew exactly what kind of sucio I was. Two days after we broke up saw me hitting on one of her line-sisters and turned her long back to me” (Díaz 2007a, 169). Lola refuses to take Yunior back because she knows that he is a cheating dog. Although Yunior’s phenotype is never described in the novel, this moment suggests that he is towards the whiter end of the spectrum. Yunior’s use of these terms reinforces his insider status, and for the most part he does not translate for those who are outside of the community. However, when describing Ybón, the woman with whom Oscar finally loses his virginity, Yunior bridges the gap between national racial vocabularies with this stunning description: “She was one of those golden mulatas that French-speaking Caribbeans call chabines, that my boys call chicas de oro; she had snarled, apocalyptic hair, copper eyes, and was one whiteskinned relative away from jaba” (Díaz 2007a, 279). Yunior harnesses a variety of racialized descriptors to paint a picture of Ybon. She is a “mulata,” which means that she has black and white ancestry. Her skin is golden (“chicas de oro”). Ybon is also described as a “chabine,” which is a variant of “shabine,” the term for a mixed-race person that is used in the Derek Walcott poem, “The Schooner Flight,” that serves as the novel’s second epigraph. Yunior ends by invoking the term “jaba” (the feminine form of “jabao”), which is used in the Dominican Republic and in Cuba to describe someone who has “fair skin with kinky hair and clear African facial features (wide noses, thick lips, etc.). Some have reddish or even blond hair and are said to be la candela, extremely mischievous and picaresque” (Vaughan 2005). Ybón’s phenotype plants her firmly in the middle of the black-white spectrum, though a couple of “drops” of white blood could have pushed her a few steps towards the white end. Yunior’s vivid, multilingual description of Ybón embodies the challenges of translating racialized identities (especially blackness) across national and linguistic boundaries.

The frequent use of the word “nigger” by Yunior, the novel’s main narrator and Oscar’s college roommate, also raises questions about the ways in which blackness has been redefined in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This odious word evokes the long history of white supremacy, extralegal and state-sanctioned violence, and race-based oppression. For many black Americans, being called the word represents an important moment in the process of racialization (Kennedy 2003,10-18). Yet his 2002 book *Nigger: The Strange Career of A Troublesome Word*, African-American legal scholar Randall Kennedy also discusses how black people have reappropriated the term, using it as a “compliment,” a

“salutation announcing affection,” and a “term of respect” (Kennedy 2003, 31). While some might argue that the word can never be redeemed, Kennedy suggests that we must accept the ways in which it is continually being remade, as its development exemplifies the dynamic nature of language (Kennedy 2003, 139).

Yunior’s use of the term in Díaz’s novel reflects the term’s multiple meanings and forces readers who may be uncomfortable with the word to grapple with its polysemy. However, the N-word first appears not in Yunior’s narration, but in the novel’s second epigraph, a poem by Derek Walcott entitled “The Schooner Flight.”⁷ The speaker of the poem reflects a hybrid, postcolonial subjectivity. He is called “Shabine, the patois for/any red nigger,” and he has a transhistorical understanding of “of these islands from Monos to Nassau,” having seen “when these slums of empire was paradise.” The word “nigger” is repeated four times in the poem and twice in the final stanza:

I’m just a red nigger who love the seas
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.

The question of whether a black mixed-race identity renders the speaker an anonymous, unimportant person or the heart of an entire nation hangs in the air as the reader begins her journey into Díaz’s narrative. Here the poem’s speaker seems to claim the term, a gesture that reflects Yunior’s embrace of the epithet throughout the novel.

The word “nigger” occurs forty-five times in the novel: four in the epigraph and forty-one in the text itself. In the majority of these instances, Yunior uses the word as a synonym for “guy” or “dude.” For example, Yunior describes the sex appeal of Ana Obregon, a friend of Oscar’s from high school for whom he felt unrequited love: “Ana was a talker, had beautiful Caribbean-girl eyes, pure anthracite, and was the sort of heavy that almost every Island nigger dug, a body that you just knew would look good in and out of clothes” (Díaz 2007a, 34). In some cases like this, it is a fairly neutral descriptor; but in other cases, the word seems to be used in a derogatory (though not necessarily *racially* derogatory) way. For example, when Yunior describes Ybón’s abusive relationship with el Capitán, a powerful man in the DR who orchestrates Oscar’s brutal beating in the canefield, says that Ybón “had known men like el Capitán all her life, had been forced to work in Europe one year straight by niggers like that before she could start earning her own money” (Díaz 2007a, 316). Yunior shows disdain for the boyfriend-pimps who have exploited Ybón, and using the word “nigger” to describe them reinforces

⁷ The poem appears in the epigraph without the title or author.

that attitude. Similarly, when Yuniór describes el Capitán, he calls him “one of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to. Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away” (Díaz 2007a, 294). Yuniór’s description of el Capitán reveals his scorn, hatred, and jealousy for the man. The word “nigger” underscores his negative opinion of el Capitán and takes on a derogatory connotation in this context.

At one point, Yuniór uses “nigger” as a synonym for “negro.” When describing the horrible fate of Abelard, Oscar’s maternal grandfather who was tortured by the Trujillo government for allegedly slandering the dictator (though the text suggests that the real reason behind Abelard’s punishment was his refusal to offer up his daughter to be raped by the dictator), Yuniór anticipates our incredulity: “Maybe you’ll ask, Why was there no outcry in the papers, no actions among the civil rights groups, no opposition parties rallying to the cause? Nigger, please: there were no papers, no civil rights groups, no opposition parties; there was only Trujillo” (Díaz 2007a, 247). In three other instances in the novel, Yuniór uses this same construction but uses the perhaps less inflammatory term “Negro.”⁸ This adds to the conversational and interactive nature of Yuniór’s narrative. The reader feels that Yuniór is speaking directly to her, anticipating her questions about and reactions to the narrative. Again, Yuniór assumes that the average American reader who has grown up in a democratic country that guarantees citizens’ right to free speech will question why people did not speak out against such injustices and then swiftly puts her in her place by articulating what it means to live under a brutal dictatorship: “[T]here was only Trujillo.”

Yet in a couple of cases, “nigger” does function as a racial epithet. The first example occurs early in the novel when Lola serves as the narrator. She describes how as a teenager, she escaped a toxic relationship with her mother by moving to the Jersey Shore with her boyfriend, a white guy named Aldo, and his dad, who forces them to sleep in a room with the cat’s litterbox. One day Aldo tells Lola a joke while they are drinking and smoking with a group of friends: “Do you know what Pontiac stands for? Poor Old Nigger Thinks It’s a Cadillac. But who was he looking at when he told his punch line? He was looking straight at me” (Díaz 2007a, 66-7). Reaching her breaking point with Aldo, Lola decides to call home, which leads to her mother, Beli, coming to retrieve her and then sending her to Santo Domingo. Although Aldo is distressed that

⁸ See Díaz 2007a, 3, 138, 264. “Negro” is a slippery signifier in the text, as it could refer to the antiquated English word describing black people, or it could refer to the Spanish word “negro,” which is a more general word for the color black, and may or may not refer to somebody’s skin color. Since Yuniór uses both English and Spanish throughout his narrative, and Díaz does not italicize Spanish words, the meaning of the word “negro” is difficult to ascertain.

Lola cannot take a joke, Lola feels the burn of his racist words. The other moment in which the word connotes anti-black sentiment is when Oscar falls in love with an older prostitute named Ybón Pimentel while staying in the Dominican Republic with his abuela. His uncle expresses pride in Oscar's romantic success: "His tío seemed thrilled that he no longer had a pájaro for a nephew. I can't believe it, he said proudly. The palomo is finally a man. He put Oscar's neck in the NJ State Police-patented niggerkiller lock" (Díaz 2007a, 286-7). Here the epithet is not the focus of the anecdote; instead, Yuniór is emphasizing that Oscar is valued by his uncle (and other Dominican males) only when he embodies a sexually potent version of masculinity. Nonetheless, Yuniór's description of his tío's headlock alludes to the disproportionate number of black and Latino males who are maimed or killed as a result of police brutality. His almost offhand comment on the racialized oppression that exists in the United States in the late twentieth century resonates with the horrific behavior of police and other government officials during Trujillo's reign of terror between 1930 and 1961. The stories of those who suffered as a result of Trujillo's brutal and repressive practices litter the novel,⁹ and although Yuniór does not emphasize the race or phenotype of those who suffered, given the long history of Negrophobia in the Dominican Republic and the fact that Trujillo was, as Yuniór puts in the first footnote of the novel, "a sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery," it is likely that darker-skinned Dominicans, Haitians, and Dominican-Haitians suffered especially during the Trujillo regime (Díaz, 2007a, 2).

Although Yuniór occasionally refers to himself as a nigger, most of the time when he uses the word he is talking about Oscar. One wonders if he would be so quick to use that term to describe Oscar if he did not have darker skin and kinky hair. That is, rather than being a derogatory term, it may function in Yuniór's mind as a descriptive modifier, one that is no more offensive than "negro." Yet if we consider the ways in which "nigger" has been appropriated by people of African descent as a term of solidarity, it also illuminates the complex relationship between Yuniór and Oscar. While Yuniór seems to position himself as the quintessential Dominican male who demonstrates his power by sleeping with lots of

⁹ Yuniór tells the story of Jesús de Galíndez, a Basque man who spent time in the Dominican Republic between 1939 and 1946. Soon after leaving Santo Domingo, he wrote a doctoral dissertation that was critical of the Trujillo regime. Trujillo's minions went to New York, kidnapped him, and brought him back to the Dominican Republic. Yuniór writes: "Legend has it that when he came out of his chloroform nap, he found himself naked, dangling from his feet over a cauldron of boiling oil, El Jefe standing nearby with a copy of the offending dissertation in hand" (Díaz 2007a, 97). Indeed, "torturing and killing political prisoners soon became a daily practice," especially towards the end of the Trujillo's regime (Moya Pons 1998, 372).

women (he says proudly, “some niggers couldn’t have gotten ass on Judgment Day; me I couldn’t not get ass, even when I tried”), he is, in fact, just a much of a nerd as Oscar — except he is a closet nerd, and Oscar is an “out nerd” (Díaz 2007a, 196-7). Yuniór’s affection for Oscar deepens throughout the narrative, and in a sense Oscar becomes Yuniór’s “nigger” in a non-racialized, brotherly sense.

Díaz grapples with blackness in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* on two fronts: historiographically and discursively. Though presented in official and popular narratives as a paradox, an impossibility, or a rare aberration, “Dominican blackness” has been a historical reality since the introduction of Africans to the island in the fifteenth century. Uncovering the presence and legacy of both Africa and blackness in Díaz’s novel constitutes a political gesture that has implications for collective and individual understandings of blackness in the Dominican Republic and beyond. In addition to recovering an erased black past, Díaz uses language to redefine blackness, especially for a U.S. readership that, generally speaking, tends to see race in terms of black-white binary opposition. By employing the panoply of Dominican Spanish terms used to describe racialized bodies and creating a narrator who liberally sprinkles his storytelling with the word “nigger,” Díaz critiques the notion of a single racialized discourse that can transcend time and space. Blackness is not, and has never been, monolithic, and it is not necessarily measured by one’s cultural, geographical, or phenotypical relationship to Africa. Like the mongoose that becomes the totem of Oscar and Beli, blackness is diasporic and takes on different meanings depending on context. Díaz urges a re-examination our own assumptions about what blackness means and what it looks like, and, by extension, catalyzes a reevaluation of essentialist notions of racialized identity that undergird institutionalized oppression.

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