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## History and transnational identities in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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HISTORY AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES

IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDEROUS*

*LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

by

Brian Joseph Flores

Bachelor of Arts  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in English**  
**Department of English**  
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Brian Joseph Flores**

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**December 2010**

ABSTRACT

**History and Transnational Identities in  
Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous  
Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

by

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The purpose of my thesis is to analyze Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and evaluate the role literature plays within the larger context of the relationship among the different countries and cultures in the Western Hemisphere, as well as the place historical events play within this understanding. In Díaz's novel, there is an understanding of the presence of multiple cultural identities. This awareness of multiple cultural identities leads to the difficulty the characters encounter when trying understanding themselves as individuals. On a much larger scale, the characters also try to understand their cultural, social, and historical place in their immediate surroundings, as well as in the much larger context of American. I will explore these topics using the critical approach known as Hemispheric Studies, a critical approach that studies literature written anywhere in the Americas and looks at it as belonging to the hemisphere as a whole. The purpose of this critical approach is to expand the scope with which literature is studied and understood. A work of literature is not constrained by the borders that have been placed on a map, a common and influential notion in critical literary studies. Instead, what must be recognized are the different cultures and histories that are in constant interaction with one another, evidence of the literature's complex composition.

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INTRODUCTION  
JUNOT DÍAZ AND AMERICAN  
TRANSNATIONALISM

In the short time since the publication of his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008), Junot Díaz has been lauded as a new and important voice in U.S. literature and a defining figure in the field of transnational literary studies. This praise is based largely on the perception that his novel reflects the recent turn toward transnationalism in U.S. literary and cultural studies. The transnational qualities of Díaz's novel, however, do not reflect a new scholarly paradigm; rather, Díaz's novel is the most current and influential of a long and distinguished tradition of Latina/o and other ethnic American authors who predate and prefigure the recent transnationalist scholarly trend. Although Díaz today can be read through a transnational model, too often what is lost in this reading is that academic "transnationalism" owes a debt to the Latina/o and Ethnic literary tradition. Díaz's popularity offers a unique opportunity to analyze *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* using a transnational model, but also to identify the manner in which this theoretical model has been detached from its foundation and appropriated as "new" by scholars who are often unfamiliar with the fields of Latina/o and Ethnic studies.

Transnationalism refers to the diasporic process in which peoples and/or cultures move from one geographic region to another, breaking down traditional notions of national and cultural boundaries. The term has become synonymous with the comparative approach to U.S. literature employed within Hemispheric Studies, a field which focuses on transnationalism in the Americas. As noted by Caroline F. Levander

and Robert S. Levine in their introduction to *Hemispheric American Studies*, a primary goal of this approach is to re-examine inter-American relations with the recognition and understanding that “hemispheric engagements . . . are multidirectional and involve overlapping interactions among various peoples, regions, and nations.” This approach has led to the identification and establishment of a new academic focus: “[t]hese bifurcated experiences of the migrant and the native emphasize a changing understanding of how we define mobility, belonging, and the nation.” Based on the recognition of these elements, Hemispheric Studies aims to examine and achieve a better understanding of the various elements of this trans-border reality. The experiences of all migrants, from laborers to writers and intellectuals, across the Americas are now being studied in an effort to understand the effects that migration has had and continues to have on the individual immigrant, the nation they have left behind as well as the one in which they arrive, and the cultures of both nations.

Born in Villa Juana, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, on December 31, 1968, Junot Díaz immigrated with his family to New Jersey in 1974 at the age of 7, where he spent the remainder of his youth. He graduated from Cedar Ridge High School in Old Bridge, New Jersey, in 1987, and went on to receive his Bachelor’s Degree from Rutgers University in 1992 and a Master of Fine Arts from Cornell University in 1995. It was during his time at Cornell that Díaz wrote the majority of the 10 stories included in his first published book, the widely acclaimed short story collection *Drown* (1996). His short fiction won several awards, including the Pushcart Prize XXII in 1997 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1999. Díaz followed this collection with his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. While Díaz’s fiction incorporates a wide variety of



topics, ranging from classic fiction to pop culture, he draws primarily from his personal immigrant experience, thereby introducing an ideal representation of hemispheric transnationalism.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* presents the history of the de Leon family of the Dominican Republic, whose Americanized descendant Oscar de Leon serves as the primary protagonist. Hardly a character in the modernist sense, Oscar functions as a sort of Latino Quentin Compson, a character who appears in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Like Compson, Oscar is a figure haunted by the ghosts of his family history and is determined to confront them in order to recover his own identity. The non-linear narrative depicts the lives of Oscar's maternal grandfather, Abelard Cabral, Abelard's daughter, Hypatia Belicia de Leon *née* Cabral, and her children, Lola and Oscar de Leon, a family history that spans over half a century. Chronologically as well as geographically, the story begins in the Dominican Republic, moves to the United States, and moves back and forth between these two nations before ending precisely where it started, with Oscar's dramatic return to the island. Throughout the narrative, Oscar is a key reference point for the characters as well as the framing device for the novel as a whole.

The novel rests on the premise that immigrants do not leave their histories behind in their home countries; rather, they carry them wherever they make their new home. Much like William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Díaz throughout recognizes that history is not restricted to the past; rather, it is a forceful presence that never ceases to have an influence over generations of family members. Though Oscar is seemingly removed from Dominican history, he must inevitably come to

terms with the past through his mother Belicia. In Chapter One I analyze this aspect of *Oscar Wao* by examining Díaz's use of Dominican history and its role in shaping the lives of the Cabral/de Leon family. I discuss how the tragic period of Dominican history during the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo shapes the lives of the Dominican people both during the dictatorship itself as well as during subsequent generations, effects that are critical in the history of the Cabral/de Leon family.

In Chapter Two I focus on the novel's geographic settings to examine the concept of cultural hybridity in relation to Oscar De Leon's indeterminate and multiform identity. I do so not only to examine the novel as a representation of transnationalism, but also as a work that can be ideally positioned within the tradition of Ethnic, Latina/o, and African American literatures. Throughout the novel, characters constantly travel between the United States and the Dominican Republic, sometimes physically but more often imaginatively, i.e., through memory. These "travels" represent not only a change in setting; they also exemplify the movement back and forth between cultures, and the recognition that with every trip or memory, the characters must negotiate different, seemingly opposing, cultures. This cultural hybridity, a key concept in transnational and Hemispheric Studies and perhaps the central idea posited in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, calls into question the supposition that national borders seamlessly delineate and determine identity, as if national borders were culturally impermeable. *Oscar Wao* similarly calls into question longstanding essentialist assumptions within U.S. literary studies, particularly the manner in which works and authors have historically been categorized according to a rigidly nation-based model.

In a literary culture inclined to separate and categorize as a means by which to create the perception of a clearly defined national identity, the transnational approach recognizes that boundaries are porous, rather than rigid and impenetrable. This simple assumption is especially important when analyzing U.S. Latina/o literature. Latina/o studies scholar Nicolas Kanelos points out that “the United States has been a destination for transmigrants from Spanish America and Spain since the early nineteenth century.” He notes that throughout the modern era, “transnational” has been an inherent quality of Latina/o literature:

[T]housands of archival documents, 18,000 books, and 1,200 periodicals published before 1960 . . . amply demonstrate how, by the end of the colonial period, the Hispanic peoples north of the Río Grande prior to and after U.S. expansion southward and westward were never cut off from communications and intercourse with the rest of the Spanish-speaking world; it was often this world and its pan-Hispanic imaginary that provided the history, literature, and symbolism to Latinas/os in the United States in their construction of national identity/ies, even if that/those identity/ies were to be seen as existing within the American national paradigm.

Clearly, what we now call transnational writing has a long history within the United States. Yet as the scholar Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez notes, despite the long historical presence of transnationalism in U.S. American literature, “Postrevolutionary American

writing does not have a strong tradition of being linked to the transnational.” Despite its cultural presence over two centuries, the transnational model has remained generally disregarded until recently. Díaz’s literary works, which defy conventional attempts at categorization, highlight this oversight.

Díaz’s novel does not present a narrow interpretation of history in which all of the events funnels towards and end with Oscar. The narrative instead exposes him as a participant in a continuous history, both a product of what came before him and a catalyst of what will follow. This is of particular importance within the United States. In a nation constituted of a multitude of histories and cultures, it is logical that the literature it produces would also have this diverse constitution. Not acknowledging this diversity leads to an inaccurate understanding of the United States’ literature and culture. Through the process suggested by Hemispheric Studies, a more accurate understanding of a literary work’s historical and cultural importance can be reached.

My analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* will focus on both the specific elements of the novel mentioned above as well as the novel’s importance in the larger context of American literature. Examining the process during which Oscar must fill in the gaps in his family history and recognizing his hybrid culture leads to a more effective understanding of the novel, as well as its place within the literature of the United States. Furthermore, through this analysis I will explore the manner in which literature and the interpretations of it have contributed to the formation of a national identity. Approaching Díaz’s novel in this way leads to a better understanding of U.S. American literature and the fact that the diverse voices and cultures that comprise it form a more unified, rather than fragmented, collective.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Levander and Levine 3

<sup>2</sup> Concannon et. al. 3

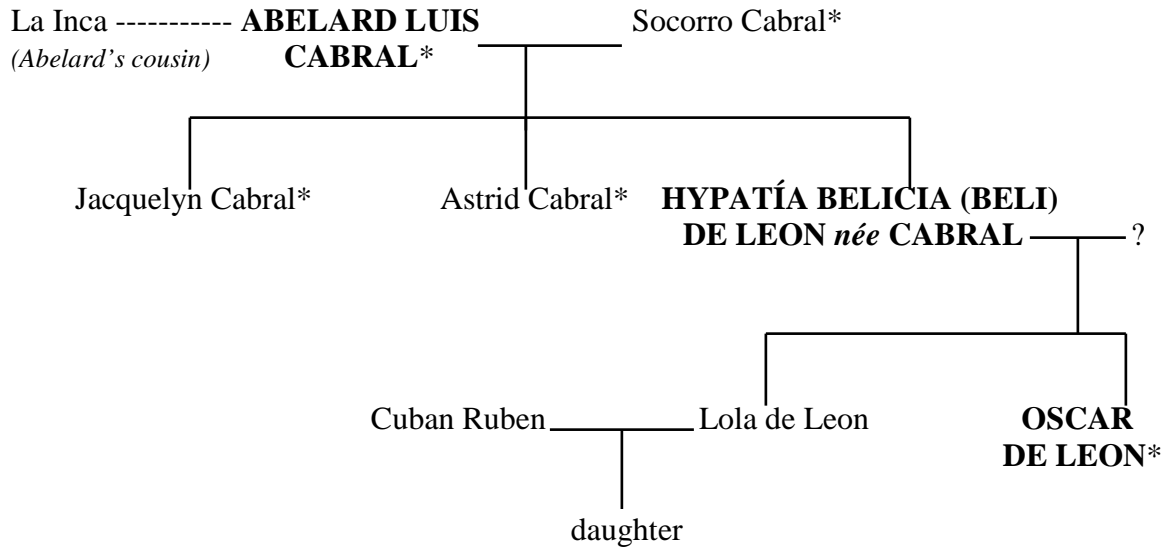
<sup>3</sup> See the Cabral/de Leon family tree, p. xii

<sup>4</sup> Kanellos 29

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 30

<sup>6</sup> Pizarz-Ramirez 95

CABRAL/DE LEON FAMILY TREE



\* deceased at conclusion of novel

## CHAPTER 1

### THE AUTUMN OF THE MATRIARCH: THE

#### PRESENCE OF THE PAST IN *THE BRIEF*

#### *WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

*. . . if you think about it, the shadow  
of history doesn't go away. . . You pretend  
that it's your shadow, but it's actually a shadow  
from a past that's very old and very long.<sup>1</sup>*

Hypatía Belicia (Beli) was born into the wealthy and well-respected Cabral family in 1940s Dominican Republic. The youngest of three daughters born to Dr. Abelard Luis and Socorro Cabral, she was born into what should have been a privileged position, one foreign to most Dominicans of the time. The Cabrals were members of the Dominican Republic's upper class, and Beli by birth was destined to join upper class society and enjoy all of its advantages. However, Beli's life instead steadily devolves into a cycle of suffering and abuse. It is crucial to recognize that the problems in her life are related to, if not directly the result of, the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, a political inheritance shared by earlier generations of the family. The manner in which she deals with these difficulties is also inherited. Rather than attempting to identify the source of her difficulties, Beli instead ignores them, which only further complicates her position and that of her family. The cycle of solitude in which she is trapped recurs in the lives of the next generation of the family.

Beli's life, and particularly her relationship with men, comes to embody the historical relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic, and specifically the direct interventionist role that the United States played in Dominican history.<sup>2</sup> These events illustrate the interconnected history of the two nations and the

long-lasting negative effects of this interdependence on the Dominican people, embodied in the history of the Cabral/de Leon family. Just as the weight and responsibility of history was passed on to Beli by her family, so too does she pass this burden on to her children. It is this historical and familial legacy that Oscar, Beli's son, will eventually inherit.

### Cabral Family History

The dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo had an immeasurable impact on the history of the Dominican Republic. In power from 1930 to 1961, Trujillo played a pivotal role in the lives of all Dominican people, including Beli's father Abelard Cabral. "Poor Abelard," the fifth chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, focuses on the life of Abelard from the years 1944 to 1946, during the heyday of the Trujillo Era.<sup>3</sup> The first lines of the chapter articulate the impact that the nation's history has on Abelard himself, the manner in which this difficult and tragic history is treated, and the effects that Abelard's own life have on the history of the family which he fathers.

Abelard is introduced as

Oscar and Lola's grandfather, a surgeon who had studied in Mexico City in the Lazaro Cardenas years and in the mid-1940s, before any of us were born, a man of considerable standing in La Vega. Un hombre muy serio, muy educado y muy bien plantado.<sup>4,5</sup>

He was a Cabral when "the Cabrals were numbered among the High of the Land."<sup>6</sup> At a time when most Dominicans were impoverished, Abelard could count among his wealth



a fourteen-room mansion surrounded by groves of almonds and dwarf mangoes, an apartment in which he would stay when attending to the family businesses in the city of Santiago, six Berber horses, five full-time servants, an expensive and sophisticated diet that included pastas and sweet Italian sausages, two supermarkets, a cement factory, and several *fincas*.<sup>7,8</sup>

Abelard was indeed a well educated and wealthy man, both of which stood in marked contrast to the status of most Dominicans of the era. The narrator attributes Abelard's success in part to his ability to maintain "the outward appearance of the enthusiastic Trujillista" and his skill for "unseeing" the atrocities occurring immediately around him, such as the 1937 genocide of the Haitian and Haitian-looking people.<sup>9</sup> He became adept at feeling indifferent towards Trujillo's crimes:

. . . while Friends of the Dominican Republic were perejiling<sup>10</sup> Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and Haitian-looking Dominicans to death, while genocide was, in fact, in the making, Abelard kept his head, eyes and nose safely tucked into his books (let his wife take care of hiding his servants, didn't ask her nothing about it) and when survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds, he fixed them up as best he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds. Acted like it was any other day.<sup>11</sup>

While Abelard's upper class status had its benefits, it also placed him in a precarious political position. As a member of the elite, Abelard was frequently invited to

official Trujillo functions. These events were particularly dangerous for Abelard and his family, given Trujillo's appetite. The narrator describes how Trujillo satisfied this appetite:

The system for gathering women was also more organized. . . . Various men high in the regime were involved in finding and presenting acceptable females, but an official of the Palace had been for some time in charge of the arrangements, and received for his efforts a fee of 10 per cent of all public works projects.<sup>12</sup>

Abelard thus took extreme measures to try to ensure the safety of his wife Socorro and his daughters Jacquelyn and Astrid. For example, he publicly claimed that Socorro had become "nervous" and that she had been diagnosed as manic.<sup>13</sup>

As Jacquelyn developed into a beautiful young woman, Abelard grew more and more anxious, since he knew that it was only a matter of time before word of this reached Trujillo. Having already established a measure of protection for his wife, Abelard began to spread the lie that his daughter was now forced to stay home and care for her sick mother. While this ruse held up for almost of a year, Abelard's greatest fears eventually came true. Trujillo explicitly requested the attendance of his elder daughter to his next function. Abelard faced an appalling predicament: either sacrifice his daughter to Trujillo, or try to save her from this shame and risk his own life in the process. After much deliberation, he chose the latter.

Abelard's decision to finally take a stand against Trujillo's tyranny epitomizes the history of the Dominican Republic and its people during this era, as well as Trujillo's

brutal legacy. As the narrator points out, “When the (de Leon) family talks about it all—which is like never—they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo”<sup>14</sup>: a joke he allegedly told at the President’s expense.<sup>15</sup> Within weeks of Abelard’s arrival at Trujillo’s function without Jacquelyn, he was arrested on fabricated charges of “[s]lander and gross calumny against the Person of the President.”<sup>16</sup> In February 1946, after being held in a prison and tortured almost daily for several months, Abelard was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. This conviction set into motion the collapse of the entire Cabral family and initiated the burdensome history that they would have to face for several generations. While her husband was imprisoned, Socorro, who was pregnant with their third daughter Beli at the time of his arrest, tried to sustain the family. But, unable to bear the pressure, she committed suicide two months after giving birth to Hypatía Belicia. Upon her death, the two eldest daughters were separated and sent to different parts of the island. Two years after Abelard’s conviction, Jacquelyn was found drowned in only two feet of water. Three years after this untimely death, Astrid was mysteriously shot in the back of the head as she knelt praying in a church. In both cases, the narrator suggests that Trujillo was directly responsible for the death. Abelard, who was falsely declared dead by the government seven years into his prison sentence, managed to survive for fifteen years. Regularly tortured throughout that time, he was finally “broken” in 1960 after being subjected to the torture of La Corona<sup>17,18</sup> and died the following year. The Trujillo regime was ultimately responsible for the deaths of four members of the family. It is this brutal and traumatic past that becomes Beli’s historical and familial patrimony.

The Trujillo regime also attempted to completely erase Abelard from history. Following Abelard's conviction, all of the Cabral family businesses and properties were confiscated by the government and redistributed among government officials and employees, any documented evidence of Abelard's life was gathered and burned, and all physical evidence of his ever having existed was destroyed. In this way the Cabral family comes to represent the silencing of historical memory. Abelard broke from the history that was being written in the Dominican Republic at the time; he was eliminated for the sake of a simpler and more manageable history. But, despite the Trujillo regime's efforts to manipulate history, the Cabral family also demonstrates the ways in which a collective memory survives. Whether the past is erased or intentionally ignored, the Cabral family, like the Dominican people, remembers it and continues to feel its influence. Although four members of the Cabral family are killed, Beli survives, and her life becomes the historical marker that determines the family's future.

### Beli's Story

Chapter three, "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral: 1955-1962," begins with a key statement about Beli's influence on the next generation of the family: "Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola like a dream, or the trumpets from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral."<sup>19</sup> Within five years of Beli's birth, the future of the Cabral family rested solely on her, and from the time of her birth she lives an almost unbearable existence. Following the death of Socorro, she is passed from guardian to guardian, a process that distances her further from her family and progressively clouds her history.

Eventually, she falls under the care of extremely distant relatives. All that is known of this period in her life is that, after a short stay in a poverty-stricken rural region of the Dominican Republic known as Outer Azua, her adoptive mother leaves the small village they lived in with Beli and returns without her, claiming that she is dead. In reality, Beli is sold to another family to work as a *criada*.<sup>20</sup> This difficult and traumatic existence would constitute the first nine years of Beli's life, until her discovery by La Inca, Abelard's estranged cousin. The exact details of these years of her life are never known, and if Beli herself remembers any of it, she keeps those details a secret. The chapter covers the seven-year period during Beli's adolescence immediately after her absence, during which she is forced to come to terms with her harsh existence.

This nine-year gap in Beli's life represents the first sign of the Cabral family's long-term trauma that resulted from the Trujillo Era. For the four decades Beli lives after being found by La Inca, she does not speak of the brutal years she spent as a *criada*. This epitomizes what the narrator describes as "the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination."<sup>21</sup> Although Beli was not yet born during Abelard's frivolous trial and conviction—she, in fact, never met her father—she, like her father, is unable to confront certain social and historical realities. Rather than seek to understand the tragic past, Beli chooses to suppress it. Her life reflects the approach that many Dominicans took in attempting to come to terms with the Trujillo Era, an approach that was driven by the Trujillo regime itself.

The lone surviving member of the family, Beli is initially spared the trauma of her family history. Having been separated from her family immediately after her birth, she was raised in extreme poverty by her adoptive families, a severe contrast to the opulent

life her family had known. She grew up with no knowledge of her own family history, the privileged position in Dominican society the Cabrals had once enjoyed, or the events that led to her orphanhood. When Beli is first introduced, she serves only as the embodiment of the historical silence created by the Trujillo regime. Beli herself never speaks of the first nine years of her life, even in later years when she is separated from that trauma by both time and space.

It is a random occurrence, in 1955, that leads to Beli's reintegration into the Cabral family. After nine years of everyone assuming that the girl is dead, La Inca hears a rumor that a girl living in a rural countryside town is believed by some to be the disappeared third Cabral daughter. Upon discovering that the girl is in fact her niece, La Inca immediately adopts her and takes her into her home. Life with La Inca is a good one for Beli, especially in comparison to the life she had had to endure up to that point. For the first time in her life, Beli lacked no necessities and was in fact somewhat privileged. Yet despite this, Beli was restless and ambitious, possessing an "inextinguishable longing for elsewhere"<sup>22</sup> and an obsessive desire to escape from the life she had, a desire that intensified over time:

What a life! Each day turning on its axis slower than a year. She endured school, La Inca's suffocating solicitude with a furious jaw. She watched hungrily for visitors from out of town, threw open her arms at the slightest hint of a wind and at night she struggled Jacob-like against the ocean pressing down on her.<sup>23</sup>

La Inca sensed the restlessness that became more and more a part of Beli's nature. In an attempt to quell it, La Inca enrolled Beli in Colegio El Redentor, one of the most prestigious private high schools in the region, but the experience had the opposite effect than La Inca intended.

Out of place in a school filled with the wealthy elite, who had inherited their parents' sense of entitlement, Beli became a prime target at school. Ironically, the same characteristics that made her a target also aided in her self-defense. The nine-year dark period in her childhood had given her an internal toughness and independence that made her capable of defending herself and was integral to her survival. However, this ability to survive also created in her a sense of detachment that was a manifestation of the coping mechanism that she inherited from her family: in order to survive, she insulated herself from a harsh environment that she could not change.

At thirteen, Beli met the first of the three men she would fall in love with during her life: Jack Pujols, "the school's handsomest (read: whitest) boy, a haughty slender melniboien of pure European stock. . . . His father was a colonel in the Trujillato's beloved air force, a heavy-duty player in Bani... and his mother, a former beauty queen."<sup>24</sup> In Beli's mind, he embodied all that she wished to be and all that she wanted in an ideal suitor: rich, upper class, and light-skinned. He, on the other hand, saw her as the embodiment of all the things that he was not: lower class and uneducated, with no social standing or significance. While he became the sole object of her naïve affection, to him she did not exist. While Beli entertained fantasies of a life with him, he saw in her only a female to use. She gave to him the most precious of all her meager possessions: herself, both physically and emotionally. In return, he used her and took advantage of her. What

for her was a deeply emotional experience was to him only a temporary physical pleasure. In this way the social order was symbolically reasserted. Jack Pujols, a member of the upper class, interacted with Beli, a member of the lower class, only so that he could use her. Once her usefulness had been outlived, she was thrown aside and forgotten.

The relationship itself ultimately amounted to no more than a month-long misguided adolescent fantasy, but it also represents the first step in Beli's life education. The experience made it clear to her that in the eyes of those socially above her, she held no real value. She was only a means by which power and control could be derived, exerted, and validated, an existence that mirrored the reality of the role the Dominican people played for the Trujillo regime. Like with so many other Dominicans, this experience led to her eventual participation in the Dominican Diaspora.

As emotionally hurtful as this experience was for Beli, it did not end her dreams of meeting a man who would take her away to join the upper class. This misguided hope leads to the second of Beli's romances, the outcome of which was even worse. Beli eventually meets a man referred to throughout the novel only as The Gangster. Once again, she jumps into this romance, sure that this relationship will lead to happiness. Unfortunately, the man she falls for is a known employee of the Trujillo regime, and, more significantly, he is married to Trujillo's sister. But, given Beli's naïveté, these details do not impede this growing affection for another man who uses her only as a source of physical pleasure. Unable to see this, and too naïve to tell the difference between what is real in the real relationship and what is not, Beli considers nothing but a positive outcome when she discovers that she is pregnant.



Beli's real troubles begin the day that The Gangster's wife is informed about her husband's pregnant mistress. Not only is The Gangster's wife a Trujillo by blood, she has also inherited her brother's brutal attitude in dealing with those who get in their way. She confronts Beli and attempts to have her kidnapped in order to force her to have an abortion. Beli manages to escape, but Trujillo's Secret Police soon track her down. Upon her capture, two men drove Beli far outside of the city and led her into a sugar cane field. The punishment that followed was a common occurrence during the era for those who crossed Trujillo:

They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog.  
Let me pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken-boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture (she would never again have much strength in that arm); five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out... it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium... Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it's not something she talked about.<sup>25</sup>

This savage beating was intended to kill both Beli and her unborn child. Beli somehow survives the attack, but the unborn child does not.

Beli's relationship with The Gangster thus symbolically illustrates her fated position within the Trujillo-dominated Dominican Republic and the brutal reality of the Trujillo regime, a reality that included the violent repression of dissenting voices and

punishing those who did abide by Trujillo's rules. If the child had survived, it would have been a living testament to her relationship with The Gangster. In the eyes of The Gangster's wife, the unborn child would also have personified not only betrayal, but also the subversion of her brother's regime. The child, then, represents the voice of a population whose history was unfavorable and inconvenient for the Trujillo regime, and was therefore erased. Beli's real crime was not her adulterous relationship; rather, she was punished for her failure to conform to the repressive social reality in which she lived.

These events finally compel Beli to recognize the severity of the situation in which she lived. She recognizes the need to become a person who is self-aware, yet her continued frustration and confusion mirror the sentiments of many Dominican people of that time. The abrupt end to her relationship with The Gangster and the months of physical and emotional recovery that followed lead to a number of key events in Beli's life. The two men who had been sent to kill Beli and her unborn child begin an attempt to complete their mission, La Inca realizes that they will not stop until Beli is dead, or she has somehow escaped from the island. Beli, who never lost her fantasies of leaving the island, sees this as her opportunity to escape. La Inca finds a place for Beli to stay in the Bronx and in 1961, at the age of sixteen, Beli takes part in the Trujillo-inspired Dominican Diaspora.

The man sitting next to Beli on the plane ride out of Santo Domingo to the United States would become Beli's husband and the father of her children, Lola and Oscar. The narrator spends only a short time discussing him, indicative of the fleeting role he played in the lives of Beli and her children. Lola and Oscar do not remember him, and aside from the de Leon name, he leaves them nothing. However, the relationship Beli has with

this man is significant in that it is symbolic of the relationship she had with her home nation. The man's only intention with Beli is to use her and to leave once he is done. Like the Trujillo-ruled Dominican Republic damaged Beli and left her to deal with the results, Beli's husband leaves her to raise two children. In both situations, it is Beli who is left with a burdensome history that she must carry alone.

For all of her troubles, Beli is left with more questions than answers. Her arrival in the United States does nothing to address this dilemma; in fact, it seems only to exacerbate her confusion and frustration. She has left the Dominican Republic, a place that has been nothing but trouble, and arrived in the United States, a place that never feels quite like home. The Dominican Republic becomes a symbol of an idealized and lost home, since she now exists on the margins of two societies. This initiates her decision to expunge the first nine years of her life from her own history, and therefore from her family's history as well. Once again, repression becomes a means of coping, but it also leads to the erasure of her own past. Having lived through the Trujillo Era and participated in the Dominican Diaspora, Beli experiences first-hand the difficulty of recuperating and coming to terms with the past. Although the Trujillo regime manipulated Dominican history so as to silence its dissenting voices, for Beli, like for all the Dominican people, the effects are not so easily erased. Despite the efforts to deny it, history remains a constant and inescapable presence. This is the legacy that Beli passes on to her son, Oscar de Leon. The burden of the past weighs on Oscar just as it had on his mother. Yet, unlike Beli, Oscar attempts to investigate this familial legacy and in so doing tries to live a life that is not confined by it.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Junot Díaz speaking in an interview for *World Literature Today*, Celayo and Shook 16

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed history, see Appendix

<sup>3</sup> Wiarda 33: “The late 1940’s and early 1950’s may be considered the plateau of Trujillo’s power.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 211

<sup>5</sup> “A very serious man, very educated and very well established.”

<sup>6</sup> Díaz 211-212

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 212-213

<sup>8</sup> Any kind of property, but especially agricultural land, which yields regular income.

<sup>9</sup> Díaz 215

<sup>10</sup> *Perejil* (Sp) – A common herb, often used medicinally as a diuretic and as a means to treat hypertension. It is also used by being applied to the skin to treat and remove blemishes, such as skin blotches and freckles, that have been caused by overexposure to the sun. Colloquially, the term is used to describe a situation in which something is being cleaned away, removed, or erased.

<sup>11</sup> Díaz 215

<sup>12</sup> Crassweller 435

<sup>13</sup> Díaz 216, 218

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 211

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 234-235: “. . . There are those who swear on their mothers that when Abelard finally opened the trunk [of his car] he poked his head inside and said, Nope, no bodies here. . . The court officers and their hidden ‘witnesses,’ however, argued that something quite different happened, that when Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral opened the trunk of the Packard, he said, Nope, no bodies here, *Trujillo must have cleaned them out.*”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 233

<sup>17</sup> “The Crown”

<sup>18</sup> Díaz 251: “He [Abelard] was manacled to a chair, placed out in the scorching sun, and then a wet rope was cinched cruelly about his forehead. . . At first the rope just grips your skull, but as the sun dries and tightens it, the pain becomes unbearable, would drive you mad. . . For the rest of his short life he existed in an imbecilic stupor.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>20</sup> Female servant or maid. As with its use in the novel, the position is frequently demeaning and extremely difficult. The servant is similar to an indentured servant, holding essentially no power and existing at the mercy of her employer, and is often the victim of abuse.

<sup>21</sup> Díaz 259

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 88-89

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 89

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 147

## CHAPTER 2

### OSCAR WAO/WILDE: PLACE, TIME AND

#### IDENTITY IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS*

#### *LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

*. . . migration today cannot be seen as a one-time, unidirectional event, and, at the same time, return to one's exiled home cannot be defined always solely in terms of physical movement.*<sup>1</sup>

In a 2008 interview during the Sydney Writers' Festival, interviewer Ramona Koval asks Junot Díaz about Oscar de Leon's disconnect from the society around him. She inquires about the difficulty Oscar faces when trying to connect with his peers: "People say 'How are you?' and he [Oscar] says 'I'm copasetic'- which means very satisfactory, it turns out. It's hard for Oscar, isn't it? To love words so much and to not be able to share that with his peers."<sup>2</sup> Díaz responds to this by saying:

He absolutely loves words, he loves stories, he definitely loves language, but more importantly than that, he's incapable of understanding that other people don't share his enthusiasm for it. . . . Most of us can mirror, we can tell almost immediately when someone doesn't have the same interest in football as we do, but Oscar seems to have like no mirroring centers in his brain. . . . And part of it is, that's a failing, the lack of compassion and a lack of understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Oscar is indeed seemingly incapable of effective social interaction. The social awkwardness he feels throughout his life is compounded by the insensitive treatment by

his peers. The best example occurs when one of his “friends” in college notes “how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde.”<sup>4</sup> The narrator states that, within a few weeks, “[Oscar] started *answering* to it.” The Spanish-inflected reference comes out as “Oscar Wao,” a name that captures Oscar’s bifurcated identity.

Born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey, to Dominican parents, Oscar personifies the intersection of disparate nations and cultures, and the cultural hybridity that results from this meeting. His life, from his birth until his untimely death, is fraught with cultural contradiction and incongruity. Throughout his lifetime, Oscar struggles to reconcile the culture of the United States, where he was born, with the Dominican culture that he has inherited from his immediate family. Although Oscar does not experience the brutal Trujillo Era firsthand, his Dominican past weighs on him throughout the novel, and the Dominican Republic’s tragic history becomes crucial to Oscar’s struggle to understand himself. It is not until he accepts the hybrid nature of his identity by coming to terms with his Dominican history that he is finally able to achieve a sense of fulfillment and self-realization.

Throughout the novel, the setting constantly shifts between the United States and the Dominican Republic. These shifts reflect Oscar’s conflicted feelings about his fractured identity. During his stays in both nations, his general existence remains virtually unchanged. Despite the fact that he has inherited both national cultures, he remains outside of mainstream society in each of these nations. These geographic shifts, which symbolize Oscar’s hybrid cultural identity, become the key to understanding Oscar’s existential condition. It is through his travels between both nations that Oscar

learns to accept his hybrid cultural identity and in this way achieve a meaningful reconciliation between past and present.

### Identity and Place

From an early age, Oscar's family and peers instill in him the expectations of the man he is supposed to be. For his entire life, he is aware of his failure to be the Dominican man he believes he should be: "Our hero [Oscar] was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about— he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero,<sup>5</sup> not a playboy with a million hots on his jock."<sup>6</sup> Throughout high school, his unsuccessful attempts to meet these expectations continue:

Sophomore year found Oscar himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often)... Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks.<sup>7</sup>

His failure to meet these Dominican cultural expectations is augmented by the fact that they are mirrored by American culture. Oscar is continually haunted by his failure because of the reality that this failure emphasizes: his inability to meet cultural expectations makes him an outcast in both cultures.

In her book *Redreaming America: Towards a Bilingual American Culture*, Debra A. Castillo uses scholar Concha Alborg's airplane metaphor in her examination of the unique dilemma faced by those who embody multiple cultures. A native of Spain, Alborg describes the cultural displacement she feels in her travels between Spain and the Americas:

Sometimes I think that I belong flying over the Atlantic,  
either not quite in Spain yet, but anticipating. . . the trip. Or  
coming back relieved that I don't have to live there  
anymore. . . . I want to be American when I'm here (Spain),  
Spanish when I get there (Americas).<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Oscar does not feel at home in either nation. Throughout his lifetime, he frequently travels between the United States and the Dominican Republic. In both nations, he attempts to earn acceptance from his peers as a means by which to find a place for himself within both cultures. But, the change in setting does not change how he is treated, and he is as an outsider for the same reasons. It is not until he realizes that his identity is not bound by those cultures that he begins to develop a clearer self-awareness.

In the summer before his senior year, Oscar once again travels to the Dominican Republic, this time taking a different approach: "He arrived in Bani with a stack of notebooks and a plan to fill them all up...he decided to try his hand at being a real writer."<sup>9</sup> This situation was helped by La Inca's attitude, which was "Instead of discouraging his writing, chasing him out of the house like his mother used to do, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be."<sup>10</sup> For the first time in his life, Oscar is himself without apology or guilt. During this time, he begins to understand his existence as not resting



solely in either culture. He begins to develop a clearer understanding of his hybrid culture, and no longer feels the same desire to gain the acceptance of his peers. Rather than expending so much effort trying to gain their acceptance, he instead focuses on understanding his own unique existence, one in which both cultures are not mutually exclusive, but are in fact equal contributors to the makeup of his identity. By nurturing both cultures, he is able to develop his unique identity.

### Identity and Time

Just as important as Oscar's growing understanding of his cultural makeup is his recognition of the important role his familial history plays in the formation of his identity. Although he himself was not present, Oscar is still affected by the events of his family's traumatic history. During the several trips that he makes to the Dominican Republic in his teens and early twenties, Oscar becomes more cognizant of the history that he has inherited. Accepting this history as his own, he is faced with the responsibility of reconciling his familial and cultural past with his present existence.

Oscar's initial treatment of history, however, reflects the carelessness noted by Geoffrey Lord. Citing David Lowenthal, Lord writes,

U.S. Americans are still typically 'people neglectful of the past, engrossed only in the future'. . . . [e]ven when the past is revered in America. . . 'the valued past is merely museumized, not integrated with the present; ancestral virtues and defects are portentously evaluated.'<sup>11</sup>

During his influential trip to the Dominican Republic prior to his senior year, Oscar tries to “polish up what remained of his Dominicaness”<sup>12</sup> in an attempt to establish his future. However, when he tries to salvage his own “Dominicaness,” he does not acknowledge his entire Dominican history. Instead, he evaluates it and selects those parts it, such as appearance and attitude, which he deems necessary to incorporate in the present. On the other hand, the dark parts of his history, like the brutal years his family endured during the Trujillo regime and way in which this tore down the Cabral family, he ignores.

This treatment of his history creates a paradox for Oscar. While trying to incorporate his history into his present, he is simultaneously detaching himself from that history, exemplifying Lord’s assessment of this treatment of history: “American culture, persistently presentminded, remains future-oriented and markedly obsessed with the idea of breaking with the past to found something new.”<sup>13</sup> For Oscar, this treatment of history ultimately proves ineffective, as he discovers that he cannot simultaneously embrace his past and break from it. Again citing Lowenthal, Lord recognizes that “[t]he past is everywhere. . . . Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent.”<sup>14</sup> Oscar’s family history will remain influential, so he must therefore find a way to effectively come to terms with it.

Oscar gains a similar understanding of his own personal history. Following his graduation from Rutgers University, Oscar returns home depressed and still struggling to understand who he is. He takes a job as a substitute teacher at his old high school, and is sad to find the treatment he was subjected to still taking place:

Every day he watched the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of  
the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the

unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant,  
the strange, the femenino,<sup>15</sup> the gay- and in every one of  
these clashes he saw himself.<sup>16</sup>

Oscar comes face to face with his own history and realizes that whether he acknowledges it or not, it continues to affect him. He must accept it as part of who he is in order to come truly understand himself.

#### Oscar de Leon and Cultural Hybridity

The struggles that Oscar experiences in accepting and understanding his hybridic existence are the result of his desire to become an active participant in society, not just a bystander subject to the aftereffect of events. The outside influences that define Oscar cause him confusion and frustration, as he himself is not in control of defining himself.

Stuart Hall addresses this dilemma in his essay “Cultural identity and diaspora”:

Practices of representation always implicate to positions  
from which we speak and write— the positions of  
*enunciation*. What recent theorists of enunciation suggest  
is that, though we speak, so to say ‘in our own name,’ of  
ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who  
speaks, and the subject who is spoken for, are never  
identical, never in the same place.<sup>17</sup>

Oscar embodies the nations and history that he has inherited, but he is not defined solely by these factors. Because of this, when he attempts to define himself in this limited manner, Oscar the individual disappears.

Despite his growing awareness, Oscar could not figure out how “it [marginality] could be avoided, couldn’t figure his way out of it.”<sup>18</sup> His understanding of himself grew, but he could not figure out how to effectively apply this in his life. He went through several severe bouts of depression, seriously considering suicide on several occasions. Then, after three years of this life, Oscar made the decision to no longer depend on the acceptance of the society around him and, for the first time in his life, he accepts and embraces who he is. No longer feeling ashamed about his love for literature, he began to plan his literary *magnum opus*, a four-part science fiction series. During his trip to the Dominican Republic following his decision, there is also a noted difference in Oscar’s demeanor. He is still bewildered by the life happening around him, but now he attempts to jump into this life rather than try desperately to avoid it, evidenced by the pictures of Oscar’s trip:

[T]here were shots of Oscar in the back of the house reading Octavia Butler, shots of Oscar on the Malecón with a bottle of Presidente in his hand, shots of Oscar at the Columbus lighthouse. . . . You can tell he’s trying too. He’s smiling a lot, despite the bafflement in his eyes.<sup>19</sup>

Oscar does not deny his own natural inclinations such as reading and writing. To this, he begins to add the experiences and cultures that are also his. Rather than filtering his own diverse existence, he makes a conscious effort to embrace it entirely, choosing not to sacrifice any one element for the sake of another. The extent of the effects of this decision are seen in a conspicuous element of the pictures in which Oscar is no longer “wearing his fat guy coat.”<sup>20</sup> The shedding of this constantly present coat, the outward

manifestation of Oscar's attempts to protect himself, exhibits his increasing comfort with himself. The metaphoric element of Oscar's coat as his protective shell should not be lost, nor his symbolic emergence from it.

Despite these developments in his life, Oscar had yet to confront the greatest source of his misery: his inability to form a meaningful relationship with a woman. In his mid-twenties and still a virgin, he saw never having had a relationship with a woman as the ultimate evidence of his cultural and historical failures. Oscar sees his opportunity to change this when, during the final summer of his life, he meets Ybón Pimentel, a "semiretired puta,"<sup>21</sup> recently arrived in the Dominican Republic from Amsterdam. Seeing his relationship with Ybón as "the start of his *real* life,"<sup>22</sup> Oscar ignores the fact that Ybón is already seeing a captain of the National Police and continues to visit her daily. The events that follow in Oscar's life directly echo events in his family's history. One afternoon, as he is driving Ybón home, Oscar is pulled over by the captain and two of his men. Despite his pleas of innocence, he is dragged from his car, beaten, and driven out into the cane fields. The results are the same as the ones Beli experienced nearly three decades earlier. Oscar, is left with a "[b]roken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion."<sup>23</sup> As soon as he is physically able to travel, his family puts him on a plane bound for the United States. Just a few months later, Oscar makes what will be his final trip to the Dominican Republic. After successfully avoiding the police for nearly a month, during which time he succeeds in consummating his relationship with Ybón, the captain's men find him and take him outside of the city. After giving Oscar the opportunity to speak his final words, "they [the two men] said, their faces slowly disappearing into the gloom,

Listen, we'll let you live if you tell us what *fuego* means in English. Fire, he blurted, unable to help himself."<sup>24</sup> On the twenty-seventh day of his visit, Oscar is shot and killed in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic.

Oscar's decisions following his return to the United States signal an important point in the history of the Cabral/de Leon family. Rather than deny and try to forget the traumatic events of his life like previous generations of his family would have done, Oscar faces them. The end of Oscar's life repeats earlier events in the history of the Cabral/de Leon family, but unlike those in his family who ran and hid from it, Oscar instead resists cultural forces and refuses to let them dictate his choices. This resistance is the culmination of Oscar's self-awareness. He understands that, while he embodies multiple histories and cultures, he is not completely bound by them. Even though they cost him his life, Oscar's decisions are crucial because they break from the simplistic historical and cultural models he has always felt burdened by. Although he himself will never reap the benefits of his decisions, he has affected future generations of his family just as earlier generations affected him. Those generations will inherit the knowledge that they are not bound by predetermined cultural and historical boundaries, and they will know that they have the freedom to be different.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Concannon et. al. 2

<sup>2</sup> [www.themonthly.com.au/junot-Díaz-conversation-ramona-koval-sydney-writers-festival-1093](http://www.themonthly.com.au/junot-Díaz-conversation-ramona-koval-sydney-writers-festival-1093)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Díaz 180

<sup>5</sup> A singer of bachata, a form of music that originated in the Dominican Republic. Bachata grew greatly in popularity in the 1960s following the death of Trujillo, during whose time in power there existed censorship of all forms of media, including music.

<sup>6</sup> Díaz 11

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 19-20

<sup>8</sup> Castillo 187

<sup>9</sup> Díaz 31

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lord 102

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 101

<sup>15</sup> Feminine

<sup>16</sup> Díaz 264

<sup>17</sup> Woodward 51

<sup>18</sup> Díaz 268

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 274

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Pejorative Spanish term meaning whore. Often used in reference to prostitutes.

<sup>22</sup> Díaz 279

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 301

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 321

## CONCLUSION

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Oscar does not discover personal happiness until he accepts himself for who he is. This development is crucial, as this acceptance is impossible for Oscar until he fully understands his complete historical and cultural make-up. He has the option to follow the example of previous generations, as well as that of his peers, and live a simpler life by ignoring his own complexity. However, he recognizes that, in so doing, he compromises his own individuality. In this same way, Hemispheric Studies recognizes that it is impossible for the literature of the United States to be effectively understood and studied until the complexity of its constitution is recognized. Although it is simpler to reduce U.S. American literature to a few basic categories, doing so sacrifices integral historical and cultural elements that have been crucial in its formation. In the same way that Oscar has to come to terms with the historical and cultural contexts out of which he arises in order to completely understand himself as a person, an accurate understanding of U.S. American literature cannot be achieved until its complex historical and cultural constitution is recognized.

From its revolutionary inception, citizens of the United States understood the importance of creating and developing “an exceptionalist New World history that differed from that of the motherland, England.”<sup>1</sup> However, the United States, only recently having declared and won its independence, had not yet established a national history, and therefore had no foundation on which to build a national identity. To compensate for this, many authors looked to the American hemisphere as a whole and made use of what Pizarz-Ramirez refers to as a “usable past.” In 1771, Philip Morin Freneau and Henry Hugh Brackenridge co-composed the poem “The Rising Glory of



America.” Fifteen years later, Freneau published an updated and revised version of the poem in which he “creates a line from America's pre-Columbian past to its glorious millennial future.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike later attempts to separate from neighboring nations and cultures, early U.S. authors were instead looking to directly include the United States with the rest of the hemisphere and its history in order to establish a national identity.

It should be noted, however, that while the interconnectedness of the people and cultures of the Americas was recognized during this period, it was done so with less than genuine intentions. Pizarz-Ramirez notes that the purpose for acknowledging this reality was done not to create closeness with the rest of the hemisphere, but to create separation from Europe. This transnationality, then, was ultimately used only as a means by which to create a national identity; once its usefulness was outlived, the “usable past,” along with the people and cultures that comprised it, were pushed aside.

The importance of identifying this historical interpretive selectivity is to reconsider the actual role of the recent “transnational turn.” Although the transnational literary history of the United States can be traced back to the nation's beginnings, the current proliferation of transnational studies is often times viewed as new and innovative; it should instead be understood as the continuation of a centuries-long process of investigating the hybridity of U.S. American identity. The purpose of transnational studies is not only to recognize and understand the existence of the cultural hybridity of the United States, but also to acknowledge its historical permanence and indispensability.

Ethnic American literature has always approached the formation of identity from a transnational model. In fact, 19th century African American authors such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois were already speaking in transnational terms when they

wrote of African Americans' links to Africa. Furthermore, as Nicolás Kanelos points out, “. . . U.S. Latina/o literature has been from its origins in the early nineteenth, and still is today, a transnational phenomenon, one that crosses borders physically and/or symbolically.”<sup>3</sup> It must be recognized, then, that the works of ethnic authors and scholars over more recent decades, during which they have continued to premise their work on a transnational and comparativist model, does not denote a contemporary trend. In actuality, the application of a non-binary, transnational approach by ethnic authors in their works is the continuation of a field of inquiry stretching back more than a century.

The fact that this transnational element has always been inherent in ethnic American literature exemplifies the reality that ethnic American literary studies is the true foundation of the recent transnational turn in literary studies, as the concept of transnationalism has always operated within these literatures, well before its formal creation. In fact, the term itself can be traced as far back as 1916 to writer Randolph Silliman Bourne and his essays “Trans-national America” and “The Jew and Trans-national America” in which he specifically presents the idea of American identity being more accurately viewed and understood as an international concept.<sup>4</sup> Of course, even in 1916 the term is actually referent to a concept that dates back to the nineteenth century. As I have noted, the concept of transnationalism has in fact been a crucial area of inquiry for well over a century; its recent prominence is due mainly to the belated acknowledgment of this concept by mainstream academia.

It is clear that the widespread inquiry into transnationalism over recent decades does not denote an idea that has been newly developed. Yet despite the recognition of this transnational element and the consistent engagement with the nation and with U.S.

nationalism by ethnic authors for over a century, “ethnic” continues to remain a provincial concept. In the introduction to their seminal work *Hemispheric American Studies*, Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine expose this flaw as exemplified in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, an anthology edited by Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren. Published in 1973, the anthology was undertaken in an attempt to present the history and evolution of literature in the United States. However, although the title of the four-volume anthology suggests that it will present a comprehensive look at American literature and its formative history, the editors' inability to effectively address key problems in their process of categorization becomes quickly evident, as does their failure to form any effective solution to this problem.

The first two volumes of the work are divided up into three categories covering the colonial period up through the Civil War: “‘Before We Were the Land's’: Pre-National Literature” (1620-1743), “Emergent National Literature” (1743-1826), and “A National Literature and Romantic Individualism” (1826-1861). While these sections provide samples of writings from these periods with the intention of showing the history and formation of the early literature of the United States, there is the conspicuous absence of writers of any ethnicity other than White. However, during this period there were undeniably important works by Black authors such as Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Frederick Douglas, as well as many recorded works of the Native American people. Not only were these works known in their present time, they remain influential to this day. Understanding that such works are too important to completely ignore, Brooks, Lewis, and Warren added a subcategory at the end of their second volume titled “Literature of the Non-Literary World.” This final conciliatory section provides a

collection of authors of “supposedly nonliterary and non-national African American and Native American writers.”<sup>5</sup> The title, which Levander and Levine correctly point out is in and of itself oxymoronic, is free of any specific time frame, evidence of what this subcategory actually contains: literary works from authors who do not fit neatly into any predetermined categories of history or culture. Race also becomes an important element that further complicates the attempts at categorization. Levander and Levine say of race that it “emerged as an ancillary but not irrelevant excess within an anthology that sought to present seamless connections among race, nation, and literature.” Race, representative of the variety of cultural backgrounds within the United States, presented another obstacle to the formation of a homogenous national identity.

Brooks, Lewis, and Warren’s approach is theoretically a promising one, but it depends on the application of blanket descriptions to entire bodies of work. This proves insufficient when applied to a subject as varied and complex as the literature of the United States and consistently fails to do the literature justice. Moreover, it has also been used in the United States as a tool by which a nation-based teleology has been applied;<sup>6</sup> the concept of the nation, then, is viewed as an influential precursor to the literature it produces. In this manner, the literature produced within the United States is understood as reflective of the nation that produced it and subsequently works toward the goal of establishing a uniform national identity. The effect of this has been the consistent categorization of entire bodies of literature into corresponding nations of origin. This makes literature much easier to categorize, but it is a deficient approach as it ignores key elements of originality, uniqueness, and individuality; in the United States, it fails to recognize the true complexity of the national identity. While Brooks, Lewis, and

Warren's response to the complication does simplify the process of understanding the literature of the United States, it leads to an incomplete and exclusionary history. A look at United States' literary history reveals the inextricable relationship between the U.S. and transnationalism, and the reality that transnationalism has been an element of U.S. American literature, and therefore the national identity, since the nation's inception.

Variations from the standard guidelines set for categorization make the process more difficult and have therefore been largely ignored. An effective reassessment of U.S. American literature, then, requires the reviewing of United States' literature in a process that not only acknowledges the gaps in that history, but that also reinstates what has been ignored. As Eric J. Sundquist points out,

Any reconstruction of American literature depends not just on acknowledging the importance and place of neglected authors but on reconceptualizing the extent of textuality, the cultural and historical integuments that bind any work irrevocably to a time, a geography, and an array of social and aesthetic practices.<sup>7</sup>

By not appropriately appreciating the contributions of authors like Junot Díaz who are not easily identified with the more commonly accepted view of the culture and identity of the United States, an entire essential portion of the history is ignored, as are its effects.

Exposing the error in the approach present in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* is not done with the intent of singling out one work as the sole bearer of fault. Published in 1973, this anthology is by no means the first, or only, to commit this error; it does, however, serve as an accurate representation of the faulty yet commonly

accepted attempts at grasping the complexity and diversity of United States' literature. The ideology that drives this approach to understanding what exactly is the literature of the United States is one that still influences the attempts to understand contemporary literature. While this interpretation of transnational literature has been more openly questioned in recent decades, it remains widely accepted as a manner of academic study.

More importantly, it must be understood that the purpose of highlighting this flaw is not to question whether or not these authors deserve to be acknowledged; at least in this regard, the recent “transnational turn” in literary studies is an attempt to be more inclusive. However, while it is agreed that such authors cannot be ignored, the question still remains as to exactly how these authors should be addressed and to what extent. Attempts at addressing this question have not led to the creation of one category for of the United States but have instead resulted in the creation of new subcategories. Because of this, previously exempted authors have gained a certain level of marginal inclusion, while previously formed categories are allowed to remain essentially intact. This accentuates the confusion that still exists regarding how these authors should be approached and exactly what role they play within the larger context and discussion of the nation.

Because of these detrimental elements, Díaz immediately enters the literary realm as yet another author who calls into question the validity and accuracy of predetermined categories. Despite the Pulitzer Prize he was awarded, He is still placed into some subcategory of United States' literature, labeled as perhaps a Latin American, or a Dominican American, author. While this does allow for Díaz to be included in the discussion of United States' literature, it fails to fully acknowledge the importance of his

works. Effectively understanding the value of Díaz's writings allows for appreciating not only the true literary importance, but also forces the reconsideration of the manner in which literature is approached and understood as a cultural element within the United States.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, an understanding of Oscar's progression and historical importance reflects the approach proposed by transnational studies as a new manner by which literature should be studied. Oscar is not the culmination of a history; rather, he is the result of the Cabral/de Leon's previous generations, and a catalyst for the generations that will follow. Just as Oscar must grasp the vastness of his own cultural and historical make-up in order to understand himself, so too must the true breadth of literature in the United States be reassessed in order to comprehend its full cultural and historical implications. Through this process is found the acknowledgement, rather than the continued avoidance, of the gaps in our history. Recognizing what has previously been disregarded in these gaps leads to a fuller understanding of the literary elements that have led to the present and a clearer understanding of the directions in which it can go. Levander and Levine point out that accepting the reality of these cultural implications "complicates questions of the national, and thus raises rather than resolves interpretive problems" (Levander and Levine 9), noting that Hemispheric Studies do not propose a new set of standards and definitions that should be strictly adhered to; doing so would undermine the goal which this approach sets out to achieve. Rather than simply redirecting a continuously narrow understanding of literature, Hemispheric Studies aim to encourage literature to be viewed in a wider scope. This process can lead not only to more accurate answers to pre-existent

questions, but also to the examination of crucial but previously unacknowledged elements of our own literary and national history.



*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Pisarz-Ramirez 99

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kanellos 43

<sup>4</sup> Comcannon et. al. 3

<sup>5</sup> Levander and Levine 1

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sunquist 20

## APPENDIX

### HISTORY IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS*

#### *LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

It is undeniable that, among other accurate descriptions, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a work of historical fiction. Abelard Cabral, Hypatía Belicia de Leon *née* Cabral and Oscar de Leon are all directly affected by the real historical events in the narrative. As such, a clear understanding of the history on which the novel is based helps in understanding the importance and impact of that history on the characters. This history, which illustrates the deeply rooted relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic, plays a key role in understanding the immediate and long-term effects of the dealings between the two nations and the influential role it played in the formative history of the Cabral/de Leon family. The importance of having to describe this portion of U.S. history should not be lost. The fact that the United States' heavy involvement and influence in Dominican affairs, specifically its direct role in the establishment and continued support of recognized dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, is not common knowledge in the United States, is evidence of the intentional creation of historical gaps and the difficulty faced when trying to recover forgotten, lost, or silenced history. Just as important as this period is the era that followed as it exemplifies the continuous effects of history. After the death of Trujillo, Joaquin Balaguer, a known disciple of Trujillo, would go on to serve five non-consecutive terms as President of the Dominican Republic over more than three decades. Balaguer's years in office, a direct result of the Trujillo dictatorship, saw many of the same corrupt government tactics. Just as during Trujillo's dictatorship, this period created a fragmented historical narrative.

This is especially revelatory because, as Lord recognizes, “nations, like individuals, have a past and cannot escape having a view of the past.”<sup>1</sup> As is exemplified in the novel through Oscar de Leon, it is left to future generations to try to piece together the incomplete history they have inherited, a phenomenon of rediscovering history mirrored by the nations themselves.

#### U.S./Dominican Shared History and The Trujillo Era: 1905-1961

In March 1905 the United States intervened in Dominican political affairs with the specific intention of addressing the island nation’s inability to effectively handle its national debt. This debt, which was owed to the United States as well as several European nations, was seen by the U.S. government as particularly dangerous as it opened up the possibility of European intervention in the Caribbean, and therefore in the Americas. In order to counter the possibility of growing European influence in the region while simultaneously increasing its own, the U.S., with the approval of the Dominican government, stepped in and began to directly oversee the handling of these debts. While this proved to be an effective solution to the debt problem, it also established a precedent for U.S. intervention in all Dominican affairs.

The following years saw the further intertwining of U.S. and Dominican history and the increase of U.S. influence in Dominican politics. In 1906, Ramon Caceres came to power in the Dominican Republic, followed by a 5-year period that saw an unusually stable political climate in the island nation. However, Caceres' assassination in 1911 caused “anarchy [to] return with extraordinary rapidity.”<sup>2</sup> A year later, in September 1912, President William Howard Taft ordered a military-backed U.S. intervention; this

led to the U.S.' assumption of several duties including, among others, the supervision of elections and the auditing of Dominican government spending in order to ensure the ability to repay national debts. Despite U.S. intervention, whose involvement up to this point had been as supporter of the Dominican government, 1915 saw several outbreaks of rebellion on the island. No longer feeling that this indirect approach was effective, the United States issued a formal proclamation of occupation on November 29, 1916.<sup>3</sup>

It is during this period of U.S. occupation that Rafael Leonidas Trujillo entered the political scene in the Dominican Republic. Always ambitious, he saw this as the opportunity to free himself from the anonymity of work on a sugar plantation and enter the mainstream of Dominican political and social life. In 1918, Trujillo joined the National Police, then the equivalent of the Army. On December 19 of that year he wrote a letter to Colonel C.F. Williams, the U.S. American Commander of the Dominican National Guard, in which he requested a position in the National Guard. Within a month his request was granted and on January 11, 1919 he formally signed his oath of office as Second Lieutenant in the National Guard.<sup>4</sup>

The manner in which Trujillo entered into Dominican politics, as well as why he did this, exemplifies the understanding the Dominican people had of the co-dependence between the United States and their own nation. In the political climate of the time, it was generally understood that "the Army was the traditional road to power and glory in Spanish-American nations."<sup>5</sup> Military power was the rule, and in this environment, political rule was the United States. Trujillo had no intention of taking part in the politics or affairs of the United States; his desire to become involved and find favor with the

occupying forces was done with the understanding that it was through them that he could most effectively advance his Dominican political career.

While the following eight years under U.S. occupation saw increased stability in the Dominican Republic, resentment against the occupants steadily grew. The United States began to make plans to leave the island in 1922, and after supervising an election that saw Horacio Vasquez elected president, the evacuation of the island was completed on September 18, 1924. However, the official departure from the island did not end U.S. involvement in Dominican politics. Over the following years, the U.S. continued to make regular visits to the island in order to remain influential, albeit in a much more peripheral manner, in the politics of the Dominican Republic. However, despite the democratic election process that took place at the time of the U.S. departure, it remained understood that those who had gained military power during the occupation would remain at a distinct advantage. This included Rafael Trujillo.

The following six years saw a the rise of Trujillo through the political ranks, a process that culminated on May 17, 1928 with Trujillo's appointment as the Chief of the National Army. Over the following years, his military power continued to increase, although he continued to remain outwardly loyal to President Vasquez. Unfortunately for Vasquez, this feigned loyalty ended in 1930 when the island's Trujillo-led military forces forced Vasquez out of office. Following the rebellion and subsequent overthrow of the government, Trujillo stepped in. He did not, however, simply take office. An election was held in May of that year, in which Trujillo received 99% of the vote. On August 16, 1930, Trujillo was officially sworn in as President of the Dominican Republic. This signaled the beginning of the dictatorial Trujillo Era that would continue for more than

three decades. As Diaz notes, Trujillo is “[f]amous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself... Tellingly, the national slogan was ‘Dios y Trujillo.’”<sup>6,7</sup> For the following 31 years, Trujillo's rule would remain absolute.

It must be noted that from its inception, the United States saw Trujillo's usurpation of power as a hostile takeover. A report from the United States' Department of State issued on May 19, 1930 acknowledges this:

[T]here is every reason to believe that... the intimidation of the followers of the opposition had already been so great prior to the day of the elections that none was needed, and it would seem that none was practiced, on the day of the elections, in order to keep them away.<sup>8</sup>

Given the perceived history of U.S. opposition to dictatorships, it would be assumed that following the events of 1930, the U.S. would cut ties with Trujillo and openly declare its opposition to both him and his government. In actuality, the U.S. did no such thing. To the contrary, it continued to maintain and further develop their involvement in Dominican politics and their relationship with Trujillo. This is due in large part to Trujillo's own actions. While he ruled the Dominican Republic mercilessly, he actively pursued good standing with the United States, recognizing that it was of extreme advantage to develop a close relationship with them.

Despite knowledge of Trujillo's usurpation of power and the corrupt manner in which he ruled, the U.S. continued to develop close ties with the Dominican Republic as the island nation remained a key geopolitical locus in the region; the U.S. understood that

maintaining good relations with the Dominican Republic would allow for the use of the island as a jumping off point for other political activities in the region. Maintaining this political relationship remained mutually beneficial:

Fully cognizant of the power of the United States in the Caribbean and of its strategic interest in maintaining stability and in preventing a foreign power from establishing a beachhead in the area, Trujillo constantly strove to impress upon the United States his friendship... and his opposition to non-American influences. In return, the United States money, arms, and moral support, during almost the entire span of the Trujillo era, helped maintain the Dominican regime.<sup>9</sup>

By 1937, the United States had not only disregarded the manner in which Trujillo had come to power, but in fact viewed him, in the words of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, as “a builder greater than all the Spanish conquistadors together.”<sup>10</sup> Despite a general dislike for the recognized corruption of Trujillo’s government, “[T]he undemocratic nature of his regime could be overlooked in favor of its more positive features,”<sup>11</sup> mainly his ability and willingness to support U.S. interests in the Caribbean as well as abroad.<sup>12</sup>

Although the full details of the atrocities committed during the Trujillo Era were not immediately widely disseminated in full detail, there was knowledge of them. The thirty-one years of the Trujillo regime were marked by all the worst that could be expected of a dictatorship, including, but not limited to: genocide, focused mainly on

Trujillo's own brand of prejudice, *antihaitianismo*<sup>13</sup>; persons being tried without due process, if they were tried at all; the establishment of a kleptocracy, as evidenced by the several monopolies Trujillo controlled during his rule and the over 100 Trujillo-owned companies he left behind after his assassination<sup>14</sup>; and the completely uninhibited rape of countless women by Trujillo himself—it was well known during the dictatorship that there were spies throughout the island whose sole job was to find women for Trujillo.

For its part, the United States was not ignorant of the severe misuse of power taking place on the island, yet did not exhibit any decisive disapproval. Again, contrary to what contemporary interpretations of U.S. history may suggest regarding the treatment of dictatorial regimes, the United States continued to support Trujillo. Perhaps the most disturbing example of this occurred in 1938. The previous year, under false pretenses, Trujillo ordered an attack along the Dominican/Haitian border, during which more than 12,000 civilian Haitians were massacred. Upon learning of this, rather than openly disapproving of these actions, the United States' reaction was instead to mediate a peaceful agreement between the Dominican Republic and Haiti in Washington D.C. Following the signing of the agreement, in which both nations agreed to no further retaliation, "Congress hastened to grant Trujillo a 'congratulatory vote' for the 'triumph' attained in that agreement."<sup>15</sup> Despite knowledge of the corruption and terror with which Trujillo operated, the U.S. remained benevolently neutral.<sup>16</sup>

This treatment of Trujillo and his actions went unchanged for the following decades. It was not until 1959 that the relationship between the two nations began to crumble. It is no coincidence that this change in attitude coincides with Fidel Castro's successful revolution in Cuba, marking a turn towards communism in the region. After



decades of support, the United States' Department of State suddenly saw Trujillo as "an embarrassment, an awkward inheritance from an earlier time, now lingering too long and imperiling the future and unwittingly preparing the way for Castroism."<sup>17</sup> No longer viewing the relationship as beneficial, the United States began to progressively cut ties with the Trujillo government. Trujillo reacted in kind. Soon after the United States made its feelings known, Trujillo began an anti-American campaign, openly criticizing the United States. By 1960, recognizing the complete falling out between the Dominican Republic and the United States, Trujillo began attempting to create alliances elsewhere, including with Cuba and the U.S.S.R. For the U.S., however, the focus in the Caribbean had shifted from the Dominican Republic to Cuba; Castro had become the primary preoccupation in the region, while Trujillo had been reduced to no more than a regional distraction.<sup>18</sup> For the United States, the relationship had ceased to be mutually beneficial. Both nations, then, had turned elsewhere for support and aid in advancing their intentions. By the time of Trujillo's assassination in 1961, the relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic had completely ended.

#### Aftermath of the Trujillo Era

Although the environment did change following the death of Trujillo, it did not begin a completely different era. While life in the Dominican Republic did see general improvement, many of these changes were positive only by comparison to the conditions during the Trujillo Era. Trujillo's assassination opened the door for the political career of Joaquin Balaguer, referred to by many Dominicans, including Díaz, as "the Demon Balaguer." Having been involved in Dominican politics since 1930, Balaguer was

actually the officially recognized President of the Dominican Republic from 1960 to 1962, overlapping the final year of Trujillo's life. Trujillo, though still willing to do the work, was by this point physically weakened by age to the point of no longer being able to perform at the level he wished. To resolve this problem he placed Balaguer in charge as a puppet president. A year after Trujillo's death, when the political climate demanded that Balaguer step down, he did so, but he understood the political opportunities that would now be available in a newly opened political market.

The period from 1960 to 1996, the thirty-six year period that encompassed Balaguer's seven total non-consecutive presidential terms, saw constant complications related to dishonest political dealings and persistent accusations related to voter tampering. And, just as was the case during the Trujillo Era, there was a fear of law enforcement and the often times unchecked power the government wielded: "During the second period of his rule [1966-1978], known locally as the Twelve Years, he [Balaguer] unleashed a wave of violence against the Dominican left, death-squading hundreds and driving thousands more out of the country."<sup>19</sup> The times during which Balaguer was in power are crucial to the novel as it is during his first years in power, from 1960 to 1962, that the Dominican Diaspora takes place, during which Beli flees from the island to the United States. Decades later, during Balaguer's final term, the unchecked police presence that existed during his time in office coincides with Oscar's final days.

The influential Balaguer years in the Dominican Republic were a direct result of the Trujillo Era. While Abelard, Beli, and Oscar are directly affected by two different political regimes, the regimes themselves are historically inextricable from one another. Hence, it is the same history that plays a greatly influential role in all of their lives, and

therefore on the entire family history. This shared history directly influences the events of several generations of the Cabral/de Leon family, further illustrating the ever-present and continual influence of history.

It is interesting to note the treatment of this shared history by both nations, especially the Trujillo regime that was, as Wiarda notes, “clearly an extremely severe and absolute kind of dictatorship.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the U.S.’ extensive involvement in this formative period of Dominican history, these events of recent history are not a major element of the national discourse of history in the U.S. Clearly, doing so would expose the hypocrisy of these actions given their direct contrast with the more recent treatment given to other dictatorships as well as the widely propagated negative views of the United States towards corrupt governments. Again, as in the Dominican Republic, this period in history is generally unacknowledged. There is most often a silence regarding this period of history in both nations; it is neither acknowledged nor denied. Both nations, then, partake in the same coping mechanism: a willful amnesia. In the Dominican Republic, the blindness with which most of Trujillo’s atrocities were met was passed on to following generations, perpetuating the silence surrounding the era. In the United States, where it is preferable for those events to have never happened at all, an empty place in history has also been created. Through this process both nations contribute to the creation of a historical gap in the place of, and as a means of dealing with, a regrettable period of history.

Yet, despite the fact that many Dominicans hold the United States responsible for the suffering they were forced to endure during this period due to the U.S.’ continual support of Trujillo throughout the majority of his time in power,<sup>21</sup> relations between the

two nations and their people have not suffered. In fact, following the death of Trujillo, the United States became the primary destination for those who fled during the Dominican Diaspora. Again, the two nations share a major event in their histories. Just as both nations chose to try to forget the events of the Trujillo Era, so too did the Dominican people once again create a selective history in which the negative feelings they had towards the United States were ignored in exchange for the possibility of a better future in the very nation they had so recently held largely responsible for their suffering.

It is this element of history that is most prominent in the characters and events of the novel. The tragic and traumatic events that take place are never directly faced. Instead, the common approach to dealing with these events is to ignore them. This is exemplified in every generation of the Cabral/de Leon family in the narrative. Just as with the nations themselves, this treatment of history is perpetually inherited and passed on in the family.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Lord 101

<sup>2</sup> Crassweller 40

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 40-41

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 44

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “God and Trujillo”

<sup>7</sup> Díaz 2-3

<sup>8</sup> de Galindez 19

<sup>9</sup> Wiarda 137

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 138

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 139

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Anti-Haitianism

<sup>14</sup> Crassweller 445

<sup>15</sup> de Galindez 37

<sup>16</sup> Wiarda 137

<sup>17</sup> Crassweller 421

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 430

<sup>19</sup> Díaz 90

<sup>20</sup> Wiarda 174

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 137-138

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