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UNFREED BLACK BODIES: GENERATIONAL PAIN IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*[*]

TUTSAKLAŞTIRILAN SİYAH BEDENLER: *THE BRİEF WONDROUS LİFE OF OSCAR WAO*'DA NESİLLERARASI ACI

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ABSTRACT

In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Díaz narrates the agony and death his characters experience as they transition between various spaces. Starting with Abelard Luis Cabral, three generations of Oscar's family are cursed due to the fukú caused by Abelard's misconduct towards Dominican dictator Trujillo. The fukú that originates from the colonization of Hispaniola and the following enslavement of the natives transforms the family members in the novel into unfreed people. Even though the two generations succeeding Abelard try to overcome the difficulties they experience by seeking spatial transition as a solution, their attempts prove to be futile. The bodies of the protagonist Oscar and his mother Belicia end up tortured in sugarcane fields that are notorious for their connection to slavery. In this context, Díaz introduces diaspora as a means of protection against the violence of institutional hegemonies in the Dominican Republic. The diasporic move from Santo Domingo to the United States, and vice versa, result either in a diasporic alienation or a transition from freedom to unfreedom. Translocality of the Cabrals and de Leóns demonstrates itself through constant movements as family members struggle to survive the pain transcending generations. Oscar cannot detach himself from the fukú that haunts his family as well as from the collective memory of the colonized Hispaniola. This paper addresses the physical pain experienced by Cabrals and de Leóns, and how diasporic spatial transitions cause them to form deeper connections with the colonial and dictatorial past they are struggling to escape from.

Keywords: *Junot Díaz, Oscar Wao, Translocality, Pain, Diaspora*

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ÖZ

Junot Díaz, Pulitzer ödüllü kitabı The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao'da karakterlerinin çeşitli mekanlar arasında geçiş yaparken deneyimlediği acı ve ölümü kaleme almaktadır. Abelard Luis Cabral'dan başlayarak Oscar'ın ailesinden üç nesil, Abelard'ın Dominikli diktatör Trujillo'ya karşı kabahati sebebiyle başlayan fukú ile lanetlenmişlerdir. Hispaniola'nın sömürgeleştirilmesi ve akabinde yerlilerin köleleştirilmesinden kaynaklanan fukú, romandaki aile üyelerini özgürlüğü elinden alınmış insanlara dönüştürür. Abelard'dan sonra gelen iki kuşak karşılaştıkları zorlukları mekânsal geçişlere yönelerek aşmaya çalışsalar da çabaları faydasız kalır. Ana karakter Oscar ve annesi Belicia kölelik bağlantıları sebebiyle kötü bir ün salmış olan şeker kamışı tarlalarında işkenceye uğrarlar. Bu bağlamda, Díaz diasporayı Dominik Cumhuriyeti'nin kurumsal hegemonilerinin şiddetine karşı bir korunma aracı olarak ele alır. Santo Domingo'dan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne ve tam tersi yönde yapılan diasporik hareket ya diasporik yabancılaşma ile ya da özgürlükten tutsaklığa geçişle sonuçlanmaktadır. Cabral'ler ve de León'ların translokalitesi, karakterlerin nesilleri aşan bir acıdan sağ kurtulmaya çalışırken daimi olarak hareket halinde olmalarından anlaşılır. Oscar, ailesinin peşini bırakmayan fukú ile arasındaki bağlantıyı kesemediği gibi, kendisini sömürgeleştirilmiş Hispaniola'nın kolektif belleğinden de ayıramaz. Bu makale, Cabral'ler ve de León'ların deneyimlediği fiziksel acıyı ve diasporik mekânsal geçişlerin kaçmaya çalıştıkları şiddet dolu sömürgeci ve diktatöryal geçmişleriyle nasıl daha derin bağlar kurmalarına neden olduğunu ele almaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Junot Díaz, Oscar Wao, Translokalite, Acı, Diaspora*

Introduction

In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Junot Díaz narrates scenes of agony, beatings, and death as his characters transition between various spaces. Díaz exposes the reader to the family history of the Cabrals and de Leóns, while demonstrating how the movement from Santo Domingo to the United States, and vice versa, result either in a diasporic alienation or a transition from freedom to unfreedom. Translocality of the Cabrals demonstrates itself through constant movements as family members struggle to perform their Dominican and American identities under various conditions. The main protagonist Oscar cannot detach himself from the fukú-the curse- that haunts his family as well as from the collective memory of pain. This paper will address the pain experienced by three generations of the Cabrals and how spatial transitions allow them to form deeper connections with the colonial past they are struggling to escape from.

The diasporic subjects in Díaz's novel transition to a rather safe place to prevent a generational trauma but end up in pain. There is no way out of the generational trauma for these characters who reexperience the physical suffering of their ancestors. As Lorand Matory suggests, cultural identities have everywhere and always been created in translocal contexts that include multiple alternative and crosscutting collective identities (2005, p. 292). In order to comprehend the pain surrounding the Cabrals and de Leóns,

the fukú on the family should be recognized as a crosscutting curse surpassing generations. So as to examine how this fukú transcends through generations, this article focuses on the patriarch of the Dominican Cabral family; Abelard Cabral, his youngest daughter Hypatía Belicia Cabral, and her American-born son Oscar de León. According to the narrator, the fukú on the Cabral family starts way back with the arrival of Christopher Columbus (aka the Admiral of the Sea) at the New World. The fukú is narrated to come "first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved […] it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world" (Díaz, 2007, p. 1). In this context, the forced subordination of the enslaved Africans by white colonists commences a curse that both results from the pain inflicted on their subjugated body and leads to the pain that will be experienced by generations to come. Achille Mbembe explains how slavery and colonialism act as "specific instances and experiences of unfreedom," which leads the subjugated being "to experience a permanent condition of "being in pain" (2003, pp. 38-39). The pain inherent in the colonial interaction is a never-ending invasion, and the novel mentions how this fukú that started with the arrival of Columbus affects the lives of three generations of the Cabrals whose lives have been influenced by Rafael Leónidas Trujillo—an "admiral" figure of their own.

Diaspora: The Colonial and Dictatorial History of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Diaspora is usually associated with memory; what is remembered, what is forgotten and what is renounced become the constant subjects of debate. Although diaspora is usually associated with a lost homeland that is associated with a past life, Brent H. Edwards tries to detach the term from deprivation and dispossession to attach it to possibility and potential. According to Edwards, overlapping diasporas exist, where different people intersect, exchange, and assimilate (2007, p. 691). Moreover, he suggests that there is never a first diaspora but a historical overlay of various population movements. Diaspora means divergence and offers new possibilities. Edwards suggests that the potential of diaspora lies in the future, for even though someone needs to lose his homeland initially to be considered a diasporic subject, diaspora also requires a return to the lost homeland. In a similar vein, the novel demonstrates how the diasporic subjects-Belicia and her children- feel the urge to return to their homeland. Once they reach the lost homeland, they realize that it will eventually dispose of them. No matter how illogical the choice of staying in the Dominican Republic seems to be for Oscar, Díaz depicts the imperativeness of the choice for him as a diasporic subject. In correspondence with Edwards' notion of overlapping diasporas, Lorand Matory draws a similarity between Jews and African Americans depicting both groups as landless, excluded from rights, and far from ancestral home territory (2005, p. 278). Both groups are shown with belief in the nation state, and Matory says that they are struggling to leave the ethnic identity they have before adopting a complete American identity. This idea can be adapted to Oscar's constant search for an identity to which he will be accepted without being judged. Although he deeply desires to be acknowledged as a Dominican man by those around him, when he gets into trouble

in the Dominican Republic, he utters the words "I am an American citizen" (Díaz, 2007, p. 295). There is no reconciliation between his two identities as he is ostracized by both countries in the end as a diasporic subject.

The diasporic subject in Díaz's novel is a product of the colonial Hispaniola and the dictatorial Dominican Republic. Therefore, history is an essential part of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.* Díaz paints a detailed historical context to his novel in such a way that at some points, the line between fact and fiction blurs. In order to understand the obsession with the devaluation of the black skin in the novel and the uprooted position of the Cabrals and de Leóns due to the fukú, it is necessary to understand the colonial as well as the dictatorial history of the region. When Columbus landed in Haiti in 1492 en route to India, he renamed it Hispaniola-disregarding the inhabitants in an act of colonial supremacy. The starting point behind the family's curse is narrated to be this colonial invasion, which opens the door to a curse that follows not only the first colonized people of the island but also the subsequent generations. Díaz presents this situation as a reoccurring experience for his characters. Similar to the suffering of the colonized inhabitants of Hispaniola under the Spanish rule, his characters suffer either directly under the dictatorial regime of Rafael Trujillo or are affected by it. Although Yunior-one of the narrators,

> defines the fukú americanus mainly in terms of the violent colonial contact, the ghastly horror, and genocide between people living in what we today call the Global North and the Global South, he also suggests that closer to his own historical time and space, the fukú had its own "high priest" or "hypeman" in the Dominican Republic in the form of the "dictator-for-life" Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina" (Saldívar, 2011, p. 126).

In the novel, the colonial and the dictatorial intertwine; the name of the antagonist changes, but the fact that the people lose their identity and their land as a direct result of the governance of the oppressors does not change. As J. T. Richardson discusses, "Díaz pointedly identifies colonization of the island of Hispaniola as the original event that produced a series of traumatic events […] that would leave both Dominicans and Haitians feeling as though they were cursed, constantly reliving variations of the island's and people's original violation" (2016, p. 27). The first colonization of Haiti and the surrounding islands by Columbus started a discourse around the civilized white Spanish father and the devaluated black skin of the colonized islanders perceived to be primitive. This discourse follows the characters in the novel as they struggle to survive under the regime of Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Known as El Jefe to his people, "Trujillo tried to 'whiten' the population through his immigration policy, which facilitated arrivals from Europe and Puerto Rico, while Haitian immigrants were limited to closely supervised work on sugar estates" (Roorda, 2016, p. 294). Trujillo favored Jewish and Japanese immigrants during his dictatorship for they increased the white population in the country. However, he was not in favor of darker-skinned Haitians, and he started the Haitian Massacre (also known

as the Parsley Massacre) in 1937, "which killed 12.000 to 15.000 people of Haitian ancestry" (Roorda, 2016, p. 149). Trujillo was not fond of black Dominicans as well, and displaying the traits of a true dictator he would make sure that his opponents were tortured or killed. Díaz treats Trujillo as he would Columbus, he turns the dictator into a colonist, a plantation-owner, and presents him with all the harsh reality of the supremacist hegemony:

> A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napolean-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master (Díaz, 2007, p. 2).

Trujillo's known dislike towards people of darker skin becomes one of the central themes in the novel. His political deeds prove his racist attitude towards black people of a darker complexion. In the novel, Díaz pictures Trujillo as a black man pretending to be white in his acts of subjugating, using, and raping black bodies. In this sense, the Trujillo regime becomes an alternative extension of the Spanish colonization of the island. The subjugation that took place during the colonial period in Hispaniola directly affects the descendants of the enslaved inhabitants. For instance, the novel turns the blackness of Beli, Lola, and Oscar into an indicator of an unfree existence, for the darker hue of their skin color leads them to be re-identified or labeled as slaves at certain points in their lives. The connotation of blackness to the slavery of Haitian sugarcane workers, Beli's past life as a child slave and the constant references to her still being confused for a Haitian field worker because of her dark skin color form an inescapable reality for her. Her blackness turns her into an exotic subject regardless of time and location; in the Dominican Republic her black body will be a burden to her because of its exotic desirability (Díaz, 2007, p. 94). Again in the Dominican Republic she will be humiliated because of the darker hue of her skin color and its connotation to slavery, and when she immigrates to the United States, her black body will not cease to suffer, for it will continue to experience pain through a repetitive cancer even though she expected the country to act as a sanctuary for her beaten body.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao consists of three parts and eight chapters that do not move on a linear timeline and is narrated by multiple narrators, creating a fragmented narrative. This fragmented narrative that forms around the maimed bodies of the Cabral and de León families serves to demonstrate how the hegemonical violence in the institutions of the Dominican Republic break the will of these people by turning them into modern-day slaves. The first generation of Cabrals mentioned in the novel is Abelard Cabral, a renowned doctor and scholar in Trujillo's regime. In the novel, Trujillo's sexual appetite is mentioned to be a source of anxiety for families who would hide their daughters from him as a measure. In an attempt to save his daughter Jacqueline from the rape of Trujillo, Abelard loses everyone and everything he has except for one thing: his

last daughter Hypatía Belicia Cabral, also referred as Beli. As he is tortured in prison, his wife Socorro commits suicide shortly after giving birth to Beli and his two daughters die under mysterious circumstances. Jacqueline Cabral drowns mysteriously, whereas Astrid Cabral is hit by a stray bullet while in church. Beli, however, is sold by distant relatives to people in Azua, where she works as a child slave. The father of the family pours boiling oil on her back, something that scars her physically and emotionally. However, the fukú does not loose its grip on the Cabral family even when Beli is rescued by another relative--La Inca. As an exceptionally beautiful young woman, Beli draws the attention of many men. One of these is the Gangster, and when it is revealed that Beli is pregnant with his baby, she is taken out to a sugarcane field, and is beaten severely. In order to escape from an absolute death, Belicia sets on a journey to New York, where she supports her two children when her partner deserts them. Her first-born Lola is depicted as a rebellious teenager against her tyrannical mother. Oscar, on the other hand, gains weight and a distrust to the world outside his home in New Jersey. He is described as an overweight suicidal nerd, who is fond of science-fiction novels and games. This leads to a generally lonely life, which lacks the existence of a woman. The lack of romantic relationships opens the way to the catastrophe awaiting him in the end, because on one of his excursions to the Dominican Republic, he falls in love with an older prostitute named Ybón. Unfortunately, Ybón has a boyfriend, who happens to be a police officer, and when he learns about the affair, his two helpers take Oscar to a sugarcane field and shoot him in the head. Lola moves on with her life, Beli who had lost her breasts to breast cancer dies when the cancer comes back after Oscar's murder. The characters experience similar situations: Abelard is tortured and killed because of his fatherly love for his daughter Jacqueline, Beli is beaten for her love to the gangster, becomes a diasporic subject and eventually loses her breasts—the symbol of motherhood to cancer after her son's death, and Oscar is beaten and killed because of his love for Ybón. The following part will analyze this generational curse and the re-lived pain of the Cabrals and de Leóns in detail as a continuous enactment of the colonial invasion.

Futile Spatial Transitions: Re-experiencing generational pain

The act of relocation plays an essential part in the journey of the Cabrals and de Leóns who strive to prevent inevitable suffering. Nevertheless, the safety these characters seek is away from their reach. Once the spatial transition or the lack of it proves to be futile, the characters lose their identity along with their body integrity. Their existence as humans becomes of no importance once they question an authority figure in the government ranks. The ongoing impact of fukú americanus resurfaces during the Trujillo regime and continues to present itself as police violence in the last generation of tortured de Leóns in the novel. In the novel, Díaz demonstrates not only Columbus but also Trujillo and the contemporary police force in the Dominican Republic as alternative colonizers. The unregulated power of authoritative figures leads to the deaths of Abelard, Beli and Oscar in a similar vein to the millions who lost their lives during the colonization and Trujillo regime.

The first spatial transition in the novel is the one that does not occur. Abelard Cabral, the first generation of the Cabrals mentioned in the novel attempts to save his daughter Jacqueline from being raped by Trujillo. However, an inert Abelard disregards the claims of his wife Socorro about sending Jacquelyn to Cuba. When he receives an invitation from the dictator for the independence day ball, he sees that the name of Jacquelyn is underlined three times. The vehemence of the situation dawns on Abelard, whose wife tells him "Didn't I tell you to send your daughter abroad while you had the chance? She would have been with my family in Cuba, safe and sound" (Díaz, 2007, p. 229). Abelard's lack of action, therefore his belief that he could protect his daughter by lying to Trujillo and keeping her away from the spaces surveilled by the dictator lead to the demise of his family. The absence of spatial transition in the case of Abelard creates an obstacle that he cannot overcome. The collective fukú hunts the family, because pain is essential to colonization, and the physical beings of the Cabral family will be in pain for the generations to come at the hands of alternative colonizers. Upon Trujillo's realization that Abelard does not want to offer his daughter to the president, the secret police arrests and tortures the patriarch of the Cabral family. As a doctor coming from a respectable family with many lawyers, the idea of torture being inflicted on his upper-class body seems out-of-place to Abelard, who cannot conceive the truth about the hegemonical power of Trujillo. As they take him to a torture chamber, he demands justice from the officers by highlighting his status; "[t]his is all a misunderstanding please I come from a very respectable family you have to communicate with my wife and my lawyers they will be able to clear this up I cannot believe that I've been treated so despicably I demand the officer in charge here my complaints" (Díaz, 2007, p. 240). The secret police inside the torture chamber identify with the hegemonical power of Trujillo as they humiliate, torture and mutilate Abelard's body. His being is of no importance to the dictator or the secret police; his body becomes an obstacle that needs to be broken in order to be overcome. After his first days of torture, Abelard is described as looking

> frightful. His eyes were blackened; his hands and neck covered in bruises and his torn lip had swollen monstrously, was the color of the meat inside your eye. The night before, he had been interrogated by the guards, and they had beaten him mercilessly with leather truncheons; one of his testicles would be permanently shriveled from the blows" (Díaz, 2007, p. 241).

As seen, the blows his subjugated body receives are aimed at his head and his genitals. A revenge for the daughter he dares to hide from the dictator's insatiable sexual desire with his cunning mind; his intellect and his manhood are targeted. Transmitted from the security of his house to a death camp in Nigüa, losing his pride, his body integration and intellect; Abelard is described to be the first Cabral in pain. Nevertheless, his wife Socorro's grandfather is also shown as a victim of the police violence in the Dominican Republic. The narrator mentions how "it was said that Pa Socorro had never recovered from seeing his own father beaten to death by a neighbor who also happened to be a sergeant in the police" (Díaz, 2007, p. 241). This experience is narrated to be of great importance in Socorro's life. Therefore, in the novel once a family member falls under

the policing gaze of the hegemonical powers, their future generations are shown as reliving the violence and reexperiencing the pain that becomes a generational curse. The torture and the beatings taking place in the novel represent the power of those who use a human medium to represent their possession of the colonized/subjugated bodies. Similar to Abelard's fourteen long years of torture- which will eventually end in an unmarked grave in a field, his daughter and his grandson will also be beaten by the police with the orders of someone situated higher on the Dominican hierarchal power structure. The curse is inherited by his daughter Belicia, who is mentioned to be so black that her birth is considered to be a bad omen by the family (Díaz, 2007, p. 248).

The taxonomy of Belicia's blackness at the time of her birth to the blackness of the Haitian sugarcane workers hints at her upcoming fate as a child slave. Belicia, with her father in prison, and a mother who committed suicide becomes an orphan before she turns two-months-old. She is sold as a child slave because Trujillo's dislike towards people of dark skin echoes in the society. The association of white-skinned people with the white colonist Spanish father grants a higher value to people of lighter-complexions. This, however, devaluates black bodies like those of Belicia and her daughter Lola. "White supremacy," as Gasztold says, "is an infamous legacy of the colonizer's culture imprinted on the post-colonial countries like the Dominican Republic" (2013, p. 215). The supremacist discourse forms a culture that values whiteness as a symbol of beauty, civilization and power. This discourse that associates whiteness with hypervaluation defines blackness as the counter symbol of whiteness. Black bodies become deformed, primitive and inept within this colonial narrative. In the novel, blackness of an even darker complexion is associated with the degradation of the Haitian workers, a notion reminiscent of slavery days. The women in the novel are described in relation to their complexion starting with Belicia's mother Socorro, who is pictured "unable to risk no extra darkness, remained chained to her umbrella's shadow" (Díaz, 2007, p. 213). As seen, the unfreedom that follows the blackness of these characters not only lies in having it but also from trying to avoid it. As an omen, Socorro's daughter Belicia "was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapoteblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact" (Díaz, 2007, p. 248) [original emphasis]. Apparently, Belicia inherited her mother's darker skin, and thus, the security of the light-skin along with the previous refined life of her family are denied to her at the time of her birth. Belicia's daughter Lola's black skin is also described by Yunior to be inherited from her mother and grandmother; "bitch was almost six feet tall and no tetas at all and darker than your darkest grandma. (My boys said she looked like a slave. Never forgave any of them for that" (Díaz, 2007, p. 168). Belicia and Lola are both described as big and dark, a reference to enslaved blacks before the amalgamation of races. This blackness associates Lola and her family members to an inherited slavery under the white colonizers; their ties to a generational slavery under the colonization of the Spanish do not cease to exist in the contemporary setting of the novel. Hence, blackness also becomes a generational fukú for their family.

When Belicia wants to attend a rural school at nine years old and thus skips work, the father of the family who bought her pours "a pan of hot oil on her naked back. The burn nearly killing her" (Díaz, 2007, p. 255). Apart from the trauma of being exploited as a child slave, Beli now bears a scar to embody her pain. The disfigurement of her already subjugated body leads her to be found by La Inca, who finds "the burnt girl locked in a chicken coop" (Díaz, 2007, p. 128). La Inca becomes the mother figure in Beli's life and teaches her that her body needs to be respected, because she is the final daughter of the respected doctor Abelard Cabral. And yet, the transition of Beli from slavery into freedom does not necessarily free her from the abuse of her days in slavery. She makes all the wrong choices—because of the family fukú—and ends up with the wrong men. However, the most dangerous of these men is the Gangster, who unbeknownst to Beli is the husband of Trujillo's sister. The secret police acts as an extension of Trujillo to discipline and correct her. In order to end her pregnancy, they beat her severely on the sugarcane field. The beating of Belicia is not short of the beating of her father:

> 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 […]; five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out. About 167 points of damage in total and it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant man proportions. 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. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly (Díaz, 2007, p. 147).

This time, the blows target her torso and womb, since the baby was the reason behind the beating. After she is beaten, Beli loses her baby right on that field. By this time, she is no longer a child slave; but there is always someone above her that claim authority over her black body and what it reproduces. Her loneliness and her broken body are described in affinity to the broken stalks of cane; "A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane. Pain everywhere but alive. Alive" (Díaz, 2007, p. 148). Like the bodies working on the sugarcane fields and modern-day Haitian cane workers slaving in inhuman conditions, her body becomes the symbol of the bodies broken collectively to allow docility and submission to the power of those superior only in violent power. Yomaria C. Figueroa states that the violence inflicted on bodies of women in Díaz's novel is aggravated when compared to other instances of violence in the text. She says that this type of "exacerbated" violence "does not stay on the island but rather is replicated and travels with and within diaspora" (Figueroa, 2015, p. 651). Even though Beli loses a baby to police violence in the Dominican Republic and finds herself forced to immigrate to the United States, she cannot free herself from the curse of her dark skin that follows her. The diaspora is both her savior and tormentor. She will lose another baby to the police violence in the Dominican Republic again, her pain will amplify as she reexperiences the pain of child loss all over again.

As death threats of the secret police to Beli continue, La Inca resolves to send her to New York. This move is thought to be one-way according to Beli at the time of her departure, but diasporas are two-way movements; and the novel reveals that she will grow to miss the place she so desperately escaped from. According to Edwards, the relationship of diaspora with the past and the homeland should be ignored in order to have a new perspective to view possibilities (2007, p. 590). Beli decides to ignore those diasporic roots to offer a chance to her children in the United States, but diaspora has its roots in the past, and the past haunts her children. Abelard, Beli, Oscar and the generations before them all represent overlapping diasporas since they lost the safety of their country because of the existence of a corrupted power holder. Later when Beli visits her hometown with her children, the fukú finds them again, this time setting its eye on the son of the de Leóns, Oscar de León, or Oscar Wao-as goes his nickname.

As a diasporic subject, the story of Oscar tells us that he never belongs. In the United States, people pay attention to how he fails to look like a Dominican man. The constant questioning of his Dominican identity, and yet the constant mention of him being a Dominican leave no room for an American identity. When he goes to college, his experiences with both sides depict an uneasy scene; "[t]he white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy" (Díaz, 2007, p. 49). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler says that gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts (1990, p. 32). It is also performative and constitutes the identity it is meant to be (Butler, 1990, p. 25). In Díaz's novel, characters are supposed to cling to these performative sexual identities; Dominican men have to be sexually active, and the women have to perform a feminine attitude in order to match their traditional positions in the society. According to Butler, if one fails to perform these gender roles, they are punished by society. In the novel, Oscar is abstracted from his manhood as he cannot fulfill the expected norms of a Dominican man. Oscar is continuously disregarded by the women around him and is treated "like some deaf-mute harem guard" (Díaz, 2007, p. 26). The narrator constantly repeats how Oscar lacks the general tendencies of a Dominican man:

> 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. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his "anti-pussy devices," Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them—sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded (Díaz, 2007, pp. 19-20).

Identity problem—on national, racial and sexual levels— is one of the main elements in Díaz's novel. Oscar is a diasporic subject in the United States, who belongs to neither country, but who claims both of them depending on the situation. As Nisa H. Güzel

Köşker argues, "[r]acial slavery brought irremediable wounds to the nationalist imaginations of the United States as it problematised the intersection of national and racial identities" (2023, pp. 231-232). Oscar experiences this situation both in the Dominican Republic and the United States, when his marginal otherness and the connotation of his black skin to slavery causes him to be dispossessed by both countries. The identity problem in the novel is the result of the in-between situation of Oscar regarding his national and diasporic identities, as he belongs to them and is exiled from them at the same time. Characters continuously question Oscar's manhood for he lacks the assumed characteristics of a Dominican man. When he meets Ybón and thinks that he finally has a chance to be loved by a woman, he grips the semi-platonic affair as a new way to prove his Dominican manhood. Oscar assures himself that, "Ybón, he was sure, was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (Díaz, 2007, p. 283). However, this affirmation will become an obsession so entrapping that it will cost him his life at the end. This puts an end to his existence not only as a man, but also as an American and Dominican, annihilating both of his national identities.

Right before Oscar is beaten for the first time in the Dominican Republic by the police, he feels the necessity to mention that he is an American citizen. The supposed protection of those words proves to be futile for the capitán (Ybón's boyfriend) and his men joke about how they bought their American citizenship papers, undermining the validity of Oscar's American identity as a diasporic subject (Díaz, 2007, p. 295). An extension of the secret police in the past Trujillo years, the capitán carries the torch of exploiting the body of the powerless to guarantee the authority's hegemonical power. When Oscar is taken out on the sugarcane field for his very personal beating, he expects US Marines to show up and save him. Throughout the story, he looks up to the American governmental institutions and official representatives of those institutions for protection and safety from corrupt Dominican police force. Abelard, his grandfather, had looked up to his lawyers for help, and Beli, had also immigrated to the United States, for protection from the corrupt secret police of Trujillo. Therefore, the family members-except for Abelard, rely on the United States to fulfill its duty as a sanctuary. However, it should be noted that the threat comes from their own, which is a form of "people-of-color self-hate" (Díaz, 2007, p. 264). Similar to the black slave drivers in slavery, these black Dominicans are subjected to physical correction by their own. Once the subject becomes diasporic, he is perceived as rootless by his country of origin. For instance, towards the end of the novel, the narrator reveals the Dominican name of Oscar—Huáscar. Even Oscar himself had forgotten his Dominican name, hence his given Dominican identity. A renowned Inca warrior prince, Huáscar was assassinated by his brother to overcome rivalry (Sarmiento de Gamboa, 1572/2007, p. 202). As Lena Mattheis asserts, "[m]any of the protagonists in translocal texts cross borders and have to leave words, names and languages behind to make room for new ones. Sometimes, the new and the old exist side by side, but quite often the latter is experienced as absent or silent" (2021, pp. 186-187). Forgetting his identity as a warrior prince, Oscar tries to fit into a distorted nationality. When he remembers who he was meant to be, he experiences the betrayal Huáscar experienced at the hands of his brother.

Still, Oscar refuses to "succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*" (Díaz, 2007, p. 276) [original emphasis]. He embraces his national identities in an attempt to escape this voice, but the hard truth lies in the attitude of the nations of which he is a member.

Each time the capitán and his friends threaten him, he calls the United States embassy to ask for help and yet his pleas for help are left unanswered (Díaz, 2007, p. 318). Even after he is killed "the embassy didn't help and neither did the government" (Díaz, 2007, p. 323). He never gets the help he looks for. As the capitán suggests, those citizenship papers are just papers, and he is a black Dominican boy out on a sugarcane field re-living the police violence his grandfather and mother experienced. Times change, spaces change, nationalities change; but the pain is the same. The beating of Oscar is legendary according to the narrator:

> All I know is, it was the beating to end all beatings. It was the Götterdämmerung of beatdowns, a beatdown so cruel and relentless that even Camden, the City of Ultimate Beatdown, would have been proud. […] he *shrieked*, but it didn't stop the beating; he begged, and that didn't stop it, either; he blacked out, but that was no relief; the niggers kicked him in the nuts and perked him right up! He tried to drag himself into the cane, but they pulled him back! It was like one of those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels: *endless* (Díaz, 2007, pp. 298-299).

After the beating, the narrator, as always gives a list of the physical damage: "Broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion" (Díaz, 2007, p. 301). In this last generational beating, the blows aim at Oscar's head. A foreshadowing element to his death and his existence as a nerd, the last generation of Cabrals is targeted for his thoughts and words. The hope he had about being saved by US forces from the corrupted Dominican police officers proves to be abortive. The experience of the family urges them to send Oscar back to the United States to keep him safe from the corrupted police force. He leaves for New Jersey but ends up coming back to the Dominican Republic like all diasporic subjects. In the end, he is beaten in the cab, taken again to the sugarcane field and is shot in the head. Thus, Díaz creates these characters as subjects crosscutting each other's history as well as the larger history of the colonized. It is the same story being told over and over again. The story of the Cabrals re-tells not only their family history but also the story of those silenced deep in pain during the colonization of the island.

Starting with Abelard, the freedom of the Cabrals is taken forcefully away from them. Before them, a continent is unfreed by conquistadores. The curse of the conquest and the violent practices of conquistadores on the colonized and enslaved bodies shift into the violence and tortures inflicted upon Abelard's body by the Trujillo government. Abelard is unfreed, his body reduced to that of the homo sacer. Giorgio Agamben argues that the sovereign power dehumanizes and unfrees the unfit. The sovereign's victim is transformed into the homo sacer; a body reduced to bare life void of rights and national belonging. The condition of the homo sacer "lacking almost all the rights and expectations

that we customarily attribute to human existence," except for being alive, limits him to "bare life" (Agamben, 1998, p. 159). The tortures he has to suffer for fourteen years leave Abelard in a state of "imbecilic stupor" (Díaz, 2007, p. 251), reduce him to bare life with no family, no status, and no control over his body.

Beli is unfreed as a newborn. Sold as a child slave only at two-months-old, with neither agency nor power to control her fate, she becomes the parallel image of the black bodies that are unfreed by the colonists. The slave overseers and slave drivers as well as slave holders are represented in the images of the police force members that beat her. As representatives of destructive power on the body of dark-skinned people, these power holders claim superiority on the bodies they subjugate. Beli seeks spatial transition for safety, and yet when her son is killed her cancer returns, this time with fatal consequences. Therefore, the United States border cannot provide for her safety from pain because pain is integral to her body and like the supernatural force of the fukú, it follows her wherever she goes.

Oscar is not much different from his ancestors in this sense. His mother gives him the safety of the United States, but this diasporic safety is only an illusion. When he travels back and forth the United States and the Dominican Republic, he cannot escape his family curse and cannot choose a home for he does not know where he belongs to since he is marginalized in both cultures. When Ybón tells him to go home and he answers that he is already home; she asserts "your real home, mi amor;" which he questions; "a person can't have two? (Díaz, 2007, p. 318). In the story, Oscar is perceived by other characters as neither Dominican nor American. In the story, Oscar perceives himself to be both Dominican and American. But when he needs them the most, both countries fail to protect him. Therefore, the spatial transition to the United States proves to be futile for Oscar as well. Denied the right to safety, the unfreed bodies of the Cabrals and de Leóns lie out on a sugarcane field at one time or another in their lives.

Junot Díaz demonstrates how the unfreedom of his characters stems from their connection to the Dominican Republic both as national and diasporic subjects. The search for an asylum in the United States proves to be futile, for Díaz's diasporic subjects-Beli and Oscar- strive to return to their home country. The fukú in the novel, which starts with the colonization of Hispaniola and its byproduct slavery-goes beyond the borders and illustrates the diasporic subject as an inseparable part of the collective memory of the colonized. In the epigraph to the novel, Díaz quotes the *Fantastic Four* comic, asking, "[o]f what import are brief nameless lives…to Galactus?" In the *Fantastic Four*, the antagonist Galactus devours planets as an act of staying alive, unaware of the lives that dwell on those planets. Similarly, in the novel, the inherited influence of colonialism, and the unregulated power of those in authority inflict pain on the unimportant bodies of the Cabrals and de Leóns. First the colonial and then the diasporic body writhes in pain; for their brief invisible lives are of no import to the higher powers of hegemony.

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