

The Struggle for Identity and the Need for Documenting History in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

The work which will be the primary source of analysis in this paper is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) by Junot Díaz. The novel places the concept of diasporic identity formation as a challenge which directly affects the daily lives of second generation Dominican-Americans living in Latino and Caribbean majority neighbourhoods in the United States. These groups often suffer categorisation practices imposed on them both by the mainstream North American society and by members of their same community. These practices, added to the generational gap between them and their immigrant parents, often translate into fragility and fragmentation when developing an identity.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao has been chosen for the paper because it includes some chapters dealing with the past of the Dominican Republic. In this way, it does not consider diaspora an isolated phenomenon, but rather relates it to past historical events. The purpose of the broad historical scope of the novel is to highlight the importance of transmitting a critical historical memory of the country of origin to the second-generation individual. Documenting the past might help these characters overcome fragility in the formation of a stable Dominican-American identity. This need to provide young generations with critical historical information is reflected in the novel through the efforts that the narrator makes to recollect and retell the personal story of Oscar, the protagonist of the book, and his family.

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1. Introduction

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2008) by Junot Díaz includes important ideas about the situations and struggles that Dominican diasporic individuals in the United States experience. Through the description of the lives of a Dominican-American family in a Latino neighbourhood,¹ and an effort on the part of the narrator, the protagonist's sister's boyfriend, also Dominican-American, to recover the historical memory of the Dominican Republic and the particular stories of the characters, Díaz establishes unexplored parameters by which the process of Dominican diaspora can be analysed.

This paper will first explore which problems related to in-betweenness may arise linked to the appearance of these Latino neighbourhoods in the United States as a result of extensive migration and also linked to the structure of the diasporic family network. This novel gives

¹ I use the term 'Latino neighbourhood' to mean a neighbourhood where Spanish is spoken and the inhabitants are not exclusively Dominicans. Peruvians and Puerto Ricans are also mentioned in the novel.

detailed descriptions of situations of those living in those neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, other novels such as *Drown* (1996) or *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) will be used to illustrate the concepts described. Problems related to having an immigrant origin and living in segregated communities include being the victim of categorisation and labelling practices imposed on individuals and the subsequent creation of artificial and unstable identities.

The second part of the paper will explain how *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes use of history and memory to help young individuals understand and interpret – or re-interpret – their condition. Díaz's extensive use of historical elements seems to reassemble some fragments lost in the process of migration and diaspora² and to try to recover a history that can seem 'tantalizingly out of reach' to second-generation individuals.³ Through Díaz's text and other sources, I will try to demonstrate how important documentation about the historical past is for the establishment of a stable Dominican-American identity in the United States.

2. Dominican-American Diasporic Identity Problems Related to In-betweenness and Categorisation Imposed on Individuals

According to Ignacio López-Calvo, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes Dominican diasporic identity as one of its main topics.⁴ The fact that Daniel Bautista calls Junot Díaz 'the face of Dominican American identity' says something vital about the novel and about his writing in general.⁵ It can be deduced that Díaz's writing may help understand how the identity of Dominican diasporic individuals is constructed once they arrive to and settle in the United States. This part of the paper will examine which identity problems may arise in second-generation Dominican-Americans' lives because they are children of immigrants.

Díaz mentioned in an interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant that his characters, like himself, belong to a generation of Caribbean-American people who, unlike previous generations, start to 'affirm themselves'. By this, Díaz means being aware of having foreign roots and being able to talk about it instead of hiding or ignoring it.⁶ This is shown in *Drown*, a collection of short stories about the Dominican diasporic existence written by Díaz twelve years before *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which shows that the mother of the narrator of the stories, who travelled to the United States in order to escape poverty, seems buried in silence. She never speaks neither about her identity as a foreigner, nor about her past:

She had discovered the secret to silence ...

² Monica Hanna, 'Reassembling the Fragments: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Callaloo* 33.2 (2010) 498.

³ Tim Lanzendörfer, 'The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 38.2 (2013) 127.

⁴ Ignacio López-Calvo, 'A Postmodern Plátano's Trujillo: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, more Macondo than McOndo', *Antípodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 20 (2009) 75.

⁵ Daniel Bautista, 'How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie', *Romance Notes* 49.1 (2009) 81.

⁶ Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, 'Fiction is the Poor Man's Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz', *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000) 896.

You have travelled to the East and learned many secret things, I've told her. You're like a shadow warrior.⁷

This paragraph puts some emphasis on migration and diaspora and their traumatic effects, which will be discussed later. Belicia Cabral, the mother of Oscar, the protagonist of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, does not give much information about her past either, although readers know her story when her adoptive mother – La Inca – tells it to her daughter Lola.⁸

Lucía M. Suárez uses the phrase 'broken identity' of the Caribbean diasporic, since it is fragmented due to the way identity and memory have not been properly connected.⁹ The characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are a family of Dominican-Americans who live in a neighbourhood in Paterson (New Jersey), what the narrator calls 'the ghetto' (23). They fit within this description of fragmented identities. The mother, Belicia Cabral, fled the Dominican Republic after a tragic incident having to do with Trujillo's regime – an event which she does not mention to her children. Oscar's father abandoned him and his sister at an early age and they were both raised in the United States although in a mostly Latino neighbourhood. Oscar and Lola are not Dominican like their mother because, although she was the one who raised them, she did so in the United States. However, their looks and roots remain. Their neighbourhood does not allow them to feel fully integrated in the culture of the country either. Bridget Kevane explains that when Latinos or Caribbean immigrants arrive in the United States they encounter segregation and economic disparity in the neighbourhoods where they settle and therefore realise that they are not part of mainstream America.¹⁰ In the interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, Díaz also explained that the United States deprives immigrants and second-generations of some of their essence, the parts that seem less acceptable.¹¹ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a journey in search of what has been erased and establish one's identity as both Dominican and American without feeling an in-betweenener.

The condition of the children of immigrants living in those neighbourhoods is fragmented since, apart from being segregated from mainstream Americans, they often do not feel connected with their roots either because of their parents' silence. Díaz explains that 'Latinos of the generation right before me ... didn't talk about being Puerto Rican or Dominican'.¹² When trying to establish their whole identity these characters realise that they do not know many things about the story (or history) of their family and the family's homeland. When Lola is sent to the Dominican Republic by her mother because of her reckless behaviour she sees pictures of Belicia as a young girl in La Inca's house: 'The kind of photos she has never seen in her house' (77). Torres-Saillant calls this family's situation a 'dysfunctional diasporic family network'.¹³

⁷ Junot Díaz, *Drown* (London: Faber, 1996) 74. Ellipsis mine.

⁸ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) 78. Further references to this work will be included in the text as page numbers. All ellipses are mine.

⁹ Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006) 3.

¹⁰ Bridget Kevane, *Latino Literature in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003) 11.

¹¹ Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 896.

¹² Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 896; ellipsis mine.

¹³ Silvio Torres-Saillant, 'Dominican-American Literature', *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, edited by Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio (New York: Routledge, 2013) 431.

The condition of second generation Dominican-Americans is very nicely described in 'Doña Aída, with your Permission' by Julia Álvarez. Here Álvarez responds to criticism by the Dominican poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín about the fact that she writes her novels in English. Álvarez explained that she is neither Dominican nor American and feels at ease writing in English about Dominican topics: using the language of the land she has been raised in to talk about topics of the land where her roots are. The comments that follow this explanation are useful to explain what Caribbean diasporic identity consists of:

It's a world formed by contradictions, clashes, cominglings – the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and that richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side ... With our finger-snapping, gum-chewing English, sometimes slipping in una palabrita o frase español. With our roots reaching down deep to the Latin American continent and the Caribbean where our parents or abuelitos or we ourselves came from. With our asabaches and SAT score; our fast-paced, watch-checking rhythms combining with the slower eternal wavings of the palm trees.¹⁴

The young characters that appear in the works of Junot Díaz and Julia Álvarez show an identity that oscillates between the influence of two different worlds; in Álvarez's words, 'a country that's not on the map.'¹⁵ In Álvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* the struggle that such individuals suffer is very well depicted in the thoughts of one of the protagonists, a young university student whose parents are described as 'heavy-duty Old World': :

For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everybody was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like 'no shit', without feeling like I was imitating someone else.¹⁶

The adaptation problems this character has do not only come from the fact that she is of foreign origin, since she has already spent many years in the United States. They relate to the way she has been educated and to the fact that García girls' parents, who feel they should be the main influence on their children and who often also impose stricter controls on them than North American parents who are not Dominican, do not really understand the, according to them, too liberal education of North American youths.¹⁷ Second generation Dominican-Americans often have more problems in developing a stable identity than their parents since they live in the middle of two worlds: what they have been taught about life and the world does not fit with what they see and still they cannot escape the huge influence that a parent has on a child.

Similarly, Díaz's novel shows a clear fragility in the identity of Oscar, the protagonist. The novel starts this way: 'Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going

¹⁴ Julia Álvarez, 'Doña Aída, with your Permission', *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000) 822; ellipsis mine.

¹⁵ Álvarez, Doña Aída 822.

¹⁶ Julia Álvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1991) 94-5.

¹⁷ Álvarez, *How the García Girls* 96.

on about – he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock' (11). From the very first sentence it can be observed that the novel includes the idea of labelling the individual as normal or not-normal. The ideas of Michel Foucault about the individual and identity can be related to the expectations the protagonist of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suffers.

Foucault uses the term 'dividing practices, which means that the individual is either divided inside him or herself or from others.'¹⁸ As a Dominican-American, Oscar is expected to fulfil certain expectations. 'How very un-Dominican of him', says Yunior, the narrator,¹⁹ at one point because Oscar is not successful with girls (11). When Oscar goes to university these expectations arise again: 'The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican' (51). Many Dominican-Americans suffer Foucault's dividing practices in the categorisation of people into the labels of mainstream American and immigrant, or with immigrant origins. Oscar, as a Dominican-American, is expected to show the attitudes and abilities by which people categorise 'Dominican-Americanness'. As he does not show such attitudes, he is rejected by both spheres: the mainstream American and the Dominican-American, since these expectations are mostly accepted.

In the parts of the novel in which Oscar goes back to the Dominican Republic, he suffers a similar kind of process: his Dominican family establishes yet another categorisation: the Dominican who stayed – like Oscar's cousin Pedro Pablo (285) – and the Dominican who left, and had children who cannot even speak proper Spanish – like Belicia and many people who still emigrate in order to escape poverty. After not having been to the Dominican Republic for a long time, Oscar mentions that 'all long-term immigrants carry ... the whisper that says You do not belong' (286).

The previous ideas about dividing practices and categorisation imposed on individuals can be related to another concept explored in Foucault's 'The Subject and Power'. Foucault claims that there is a form of power that directly affects the individual and ties him or her to an identity. For Foucault, identity is merely an imposed and artificial 'law of truth' so that individuals recognise themselves and, more importantly, are recognised by others.²⁰ Therefore, an identity which is defined by expectations imposed upon how people with a certain ethnic or national origin should behave is not real.

Collocations like 'normal boy' (11) or 'typical male' (20) are recurrent in the novel, showing the prevalence of practices like those described by Foucault in 'The Subject and Power'. Furthermore, the narrator points out that otherness is even more salient and, therefore,

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Power*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley et al (New York: New Press, 2000) 326.

¹⁹ The narrator, although not known until the novel is well advanced, is one of the characters. He dated Oscar's sister for some time and developed a friendship with Oscar, with whom he lived in college. As a narrator, he shows great awareness of the fact that he is telling Oscar's story for the purpose of keeping his memory alive. It is clear that he has researched the history of the Dominican Republic as he includes some relevant chapters of it in the footnotes.

²⁰ Foucault 331.

persecuted in ‘the ghetto’, a place which as I have mentioned, contributes to this fragility of identity: ‘You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest’ (23).

The fact that second generation Dominican-Americans lack critical information about their roots and the history of their country has often translated into an idealisation of the historical past. Lucía M. Suárez writes:

a more sustained reflection of memory obliges us to recognize that memory can also be confining ... Numerous studies of immigration show that displaced populations often mythologize and ossify the culture and habits of the country left behind. ... Many children of the Caribbean ‘return’ to the island of their childhood, or to the island of their parents, in search of an abandoned world, seeking to match the emotional family memories to the geographical place. But this is not possible. The island that was left long ago has, like any place in the world, changed dramatically.²¹

Rumbaut describes how American society tries to ‘make a superidentity’ out of the multicultural blend that its inhabitants constitute. If this process of Americanisation fails, ‘one-size-fits-all panethnic labels’ arise.²² This relates to Foucault’s dividing practices in which individuals must be in one label or the other.²³ If something or someone escapes that logic, society is afraid and insecure since fears of not being able to recognise and categorise take place. There are two possible responses to these practices according to Rumbaut: second generation individuals either reject ethnic roots and ‘assimilate into the white middle-class majority’, or develop a ‘heightened ethnic awareness within solidarity’. This last case is especially common when individuals are easily recognised as having immigrant origins due to physical appearance.²⁴ Having a salient physical appearance, or one that is different from the mainstream, favours the emergence of Foucault’s dividing practices since it contributes to two-sided categorisation.

If, according to Foucault, identity is an imposition, the pressure on second-generation Dominican-Americans to accept an identity which is often far from the truth can be related to this notion of identity as a false ‘law of truth’ that society imposes on individuals in order to label them into fixed categories. Therefore, characters in these novels often show fragile identities and artificial attitudes and need to explore the histories and stories of their country and family more deeply. Their condition of living in the middle of two distinct cultural spheres of influence and feeling that they are outsiders in both the homeland and the mainland complicates the development of a Dominican-American identity. Transmitting an accurate and critical historical memory of the country of origin of second-generation diasporic characters is essential for them to construct a stable identity. The following part of the paper will deal with the issue of

²¹ Suárez 5; ellipsis mine.

²² Rubén G. Rumbaut, ‘The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Segmented Assimilation Among Children of Immigrants’, *The International Migration Review* 28.4 (1994) 749; 753.

²³ Foucault 326.

²⁴ Rumbaut 753-4.

memory and documentation used to confront the process of acculturation in Dominican-American diasporic individuals as shown in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

3. Historical Memory and Documents and Dominican-American Identity.

Memory can keep individuals from moving on and imprison them in the past. According to Suárez, this happens when the image of the past is frozen. Despite the negative effects that idealising the past can have on the development of a stable identity, memory can also be used in positive ways for this purpose. Memory needs to be brought to the present to overcome trauma and define one's cultural identity as a second-generation individual.²⁵ Being able to notice the difference between official history and historical memory is the first step to take.

On the one hand, official history can be defined as an officially legitimate fact unable to create affection because it does not connect the past with the present. On the other hand, memory connects the past with the present and feeds on personal stories.²⁶ Junot Díaz's *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an innovative novel in this sense because it considers personal stories of great importance to define a nation's cultural identity. In Flores-Rodríguez's words, Junot Díaz gives historical importance to 'traditionally dispossessed characters'.²⁷ Furthermore, the novel continuously refers to the violent past of the Dominican Republic without omitting controversial facts which might be a taboo in other contexts.

Walter Benjamin's view on history is more related with memory than with official history. Benjamin criticises what he calls 'historicism' by arguing that it perceives history as a stable and eternal unit which is perceived in a single and unique moment of time.²⁸ On the contrary, Benjamin sees history as an image which is perceived from the present moment and that changes as time – and progress – go by, so it is always changing.²⁹ In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz criticised Vargas Llosa's approach to the 'Trujillato', claiming that it was identical to a biography of the dictator written forty years. Díaz's point is the same as Benjamin's: that history should be told according to the present situation. In this interview, Díaz mentioned the following quote by Glissant: 'the past, to which we were subjected ... has not yet emerged as history for us.'³⁰ History is an active process and narratives like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are needed to construct it. Time also contributes to perceive the past in different manners. For example, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is able to discuss explicitly the barbarities perpetrated by Trujillo's regime without euphemisms, something which is only possible when time has passed. According to Benjamin, official history does not always tell the truth; it has just taken possession of it.³¹ Since history is always changing, new narratives

²⁵ Suárez 18-19.

²⁶ Aurora Fernández Polanco et al. *Prácticas Artísticas Contemporáneas* (Madrid: Editorial Universitaria Ramón Areces, 2014) 134.

²⁷ Daynalí Flores-Rodríguez, 'Addressing the Fukú in Us: Junot Díaz and the New Novel of Dictatorship', *Antípodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 20 (2009) 95.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Tesis sobre la Historia* (Madrid: Caum, 1942) 14, 15.

²⁹ Benjamin 17, 18.

³⁰ Edwidge Danticat, 'Junot Díaz', *Bomb – Artists in Conversation* (Fall 2007). Ellipsis mine.

³¹ Benjamin 12.

are also needed. Yuniór tells the story – and the history – in an uncommon way. This process of retelling official history is what the novel’s characters need in order to develop a stable identity.

The narrator makes many references to historical events, thus exhibiting a desire to understand the past. Although Oscar and Lola do not explicitly explore the country’s historical events, Yuniór includes much information about ‘El Trujillato’, the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic which lasted from 1930 to 1961. This dictatorship is claimed to be the historical motive for the start of the Dominican diaspora in the novel, according to Machado Sáez.³² Through the footnotes, fragmented information about this past researched by Yuniór is added to the main text. Characters do not talk about events such as how Trujillo’s regime repression may have made Belicia unable to talk about her past, for example. But information of this kind is included in the footnotes. On page 233 the narrator describes how violence was used in the regime to perpetuate silence and censorship:

he aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries, a border that exists beyond maps, that it is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people.

The problem with the history of the Dominican Republic is its excessive violence,³³ which often generates taboos and silences. The need for fiction and literature to recover historical memory and to understand the Dominican-American condition has been of great importance to many critics and diaspora writers. An example is Díaz’s use of science fiction in this novel, which can be translated as an impossibility to explain certain facts without recurring to fantasy and imagination. Regardless of his extensive use of fantasy, Yuniór, the narrator, insists on the story being real on many occasions:

Would it be better if I had Oscar meet Ybón at the World Famous Lavacarro, where Jahyra works six days a week, where a brother can get his head and his fenders polished while he waits ... Would this be better? Yes? But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. (296)

This quotation portrays Yuniór’s obsession with transmitting the story of Oscar and his clear awareness of his role as a narrator. Retelling official history and, at the same time, Oscar’s story, has certain implications: Yuniór seems to perceive himself as a representative figure of the diaspora embodying the role of the storyteller. Díaz sees the storyteller as a figure wanting to order and explain things and, ultimately, find an explanation for oneself.³⁴ The importance of the role of the storyteller is also highlighted in the Dominican-American novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), written by Julia Álvarez. One of the characters, Dedé, performs this role and

³² Elena Machado Saez, ‘Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance’, *Contemporary Literature* 52.3 (2011) 526.

³³ Suárez 8.

³⁴ Junot Díaz, ‘Junot Díaz Redefines Macho: An Interview with the Author of the Pulitzer Prize Winning Novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’, by Paul Jay, *In These Times* (14 April 2008).

similarly seeks an explanation for what happened to her sisters and to herself:

But all I hear is my own breathing and the blessed silence of those cool, clear nights under the anacahuita tree before anyone breathes a word of the future. And I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mamá and Papá, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize – it's me, Dedé, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story.³⁵

Nevertheless, Yunió encounters difficulties in retelling both Oscar's story and the history of the Dominican Republic.³⁶ It is noteworthy that the problem Yunió faces is similar in both (hi)stories: fragmentation and missing information; therefore, the story cannot be told linearly.³⁷ Hanna argues that the impossibility of telling the story and history in a linear way parallels the diasporic condition of the family.³⁸ The double narrative of Oscar's life and the Dominican Republic history establishes both 'histories' as deeply connected. The history of a nation (dictatorship, migration, diaspora ...) might directly affect the identity of the individual. But again, the violent history of the Dominican Republic makes the reconciliation of history and identity almost impossible. Bridget Kevane explains that: 'A dictatorship tears apart not only physical homes and nations, but the very identities of individuals'.³⁹ It is hard for characters like Oscar to understand how a history that they have not lived may affect their own identity, even more when confronted with their parents' silences.

Fragmentation, in the case of telling Oscar's story, comes from the pastiche of influences he has to deal with: his Dominican mother and his North American education. Furthermore, Flores-Rodríguez explains that Oscar's exposure to much media entertainment – including Japanese animated series or videogames – reflects multiculturalism,⁴⁰ a phenomenon which defines the present-day world of migration, diaspora, and cultures in constant contact. Derek Walcott vindicated the need to treat the merging of different cultures as something defining of the Caribbean identity, something which he finds fascinating instead of confusing or fragmentary.⁴¹ The merging of cultures is something that also takes place in the United States which, like the Caribbean, harbours a multitude of different nationalities and cultures due to migration.

Walcott also expresses his mistrust for official history: 'The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antillean there are few ruins to sigh over.'⁴² In order to recover the historical memory of Oscar's family, the narrator is confronted with these fragments that come, apart from the conjunct of cultures intrinsic to the Caribbean identity, from the process of diaspora to the United States. When talking about the formation of the nations of the Antilles, Walcott mentions the disparate races and cultures that converged: Asian, African, European, and so on. Diasporic individuals' identities can relate to this concept of different cultures brought

³⁵ Julia Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (New York: Plume 1995) 321.

³⁶ Hanna 498.

³⁷ Hanna 498.

³⁸ Hanna 500.

³⁹ Kevane 10.

⁴⁰ Flores-Rodríguez 100.

⁴¹ Derek Walcott, *The Antilles. Fragments of Epic Memory* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 1992).

⁴² Walcott.

together, since, as Díaz mentioned, the Dominican Republic and the United States show a sharp contrast.⁴³ Unlike what the characters of novels like *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* perceive, this merging of different influences reinforces, according to Walcott, the identity of the people who populate the land. Walcott affirms that such identity is created by the people themselves, by 'restoring our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary'.⁴⁴ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reconsiders historical memory and a multitude of cultural influences so that, following Walcott's view, it can reconstruct a stable and authentic cultural identity. Being able to create a collective memory out of fragments is more constructive for developing stable identities than relying on official history and 'ruins'.⁴⁵

By opening *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with Derek Walcott's poem 'The Schooner Flight', Díaz makes a point about the heterogeneity of the Caribbean diasporic identity. 'I am either nobody or I am a nation',⁴⁶ the poem says, alluding to the disparate nature of the Antilles. However, as I mentioned in the first part of the paper, otherness and heterogeneity are often rejected in the diasporic community in the United States, in which certain behaviours are expected according to national origin. The fact that Oscar's masculinity does not comply with what a Dominican macho is expected to be implies a rejection of this kind of labelling attitudes towards individuals. The narrator uses the marginal figure of Oscar as a representation of the diaspora so that readers are aware of his atypicality. When readers become aware of it, Oscar's place within the Dominican community becomes visible.⁴⁷ Thus, a metafictional reflection about the power of narratives is made: thanks to narratives like the one Yunior tries to build, second generation Dominican-Americans, and other members of a society corrupted by the need to categorise individuals, can be aware of how to develop an identity free from external pressures.

The last reflections of Dedé in *In the Time of the Butterflies* can also be applied to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: the defence of fiction and literature to supply a need for critical information and documentation. Monica Hanna comments on this aspect of the novel and offers a glimpse at the importance of documentation about the past for dealing with the present. She explains how, at the end of the novel, Yunior fantasises about the time when Lola's daughter Isis will grow up and the fukú will come to her.⁴⁸ Elena Machado Sáez defines fukú – the family's curse – as the violence that haunted the Dominican Republic in its darkest days returning to the lives of the Dominican diasporic subjects.⁴⁹ However, Hanna explains that thanks to the documentation about Oscar de León's story that Yunior will offer Lola's daughter, she will not have to confront the same identity problems as her uncle: 'Memory acts as a sort of talisman for her.'⁵⁰ This assumption can be related to the previously mentioned distinction between memory

⁴³ Díaz, 'Junot Díaz Redefines Macho'.

⁴⁴ Walcott

⁴⁵ Walcott

⁴⁶ Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner's Flight' (1986) quoted in Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

⁴⁷ Machado Sáez 533

⁴⁸ Hanna 516.

⁴⁹ Machado Sáez 526.

⁵⁰ Hanna 516.

and official history made by Fernández Polanco. By recovering personal stories rather than relying on the official and accepted history, one can deal with the past instead of idealising it, and repeating the same kind of mistakes.

The fukú is fascinating for Díaz because its origin dates back to the creation of the Caribbean and its convergence of different cultures and races.⁵¹ The first words of the novel explain this:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles (1).

Yunior's attempt to write Oscar's story is meant to be a counter-spell for a curse which feeds on death and repression.⁵² In the interview with Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz reveals that what mattered the most about fukú is the ability to see it, not to destroy it.⁵³ Therefore, the idea that documentation is vital to develop a stable identity as a Dominican-American relates to the purpose of this book: Yunior writes a story which serves as documentation so that future generations understand and overcome a past defined by violence, repression, and silencing.

In conclusion, the novel shows that repression and impositions on individuals can be fought with the use of documentation. The tragic history of the Dominican Republic, which includes silence and repression due to the many years of dictatorship the country suffered, might have created an ideological national structure which has been unconsciously transmitted to second generation Dominican-Americans, even though they may have not lived through the historical events which led to it.⁵⁴ Expectations such as the fact that Dominican males should have a strong sexual desire and a violent attitude are widely accepted among young Dominican-Americans living in the United States.⁵⁵ This rejection of difference and otherness is a representation of the Dominican dictatorship history. Because such history is so violent and traumatic, works of fiction and the use of imagination are needed in order to understand and work through it. The novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* places an atypical Dominican-American male as the protagonist in order to defy these intolerant attitudes. Furthermore, documenting the past of the nation is needed so as not to repeat the same cyclical attitudes of repression and violence.⁵⁶ The need to maintain and recuperate Oscar's personal story parallels a further need to inform young second-generation diasporic individuals about the past of their nations of origin.

4. Conclusion

The extensive processes of diaspora of Dominican-Americans and other nationalities have

⁵¹ Díaz Interview with Edwidge Danticat.

⁵² Flores Rodríguez 94.

⁵³ Díaz, Interview by Edwidge Danticat.

⁵⁴ Sandra Cox, 'The Trujillato and Testimonial Fiction: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma and National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 20 (2009) 107.

⁵⁵ Flores-Rodríguez 101.

⁵⁶ Hanna 500.

resulted in the emergence of Latino segregated majority neighbourhoods in the United States, and a generation of people who live between two spheres of influence. This is known as hyphenated identities,⁵⁷ which are more and more common in the American social scene due to increasing mobility and migration.⁵⁸ Thus, second generations can feel insecure and fragile due to their state of in-betweenness. Their parents do not often feel integrated in the mainland, they do not feel connected to their roots either, and certain attitudes of categorisation and segregation deprive them of feeling part of mainstream America.

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate how the encounter of both cultures has often resulted in practices of categorisation. In the novel, both mainstream North Americans and Dominican-Americans accept the imposition of labelling practices upon children of immigrants. This imposition – that Dominican-Americans should be violent and promiscuous, for example – can entail identity struggles to characters like Oscar who do not comply with this definition. Furthermore, an identity which is based on expectations imposed according to ‘one-or-the-other’ categorisation practices is far from being authentic; it is only an imposition.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is different from other Dominican diaspora novels because it includes a broad historical scope to which present-time identity struggles relate. With this consideration of history, Díaz connects a contemporary social phenomenon experienced in the mainland with past historical events lived many years before in the homeland. Díaz dates the origin of the diaspora to Trujillo times.⁵⁹ Therefore, historical events about the dictatorship had to be included in the narration of Oscar’s story, by way of footnotes.

My purpose was to demonstrate that of the emphasis put on historical memory in the novel tries to convey the notion that documentation about the past is essential for the development of a children of immigrant identity. Not only documentation is needed, but also a reconsideration of how the official history has been told. The way in which the novel achieves this is by using a double narrative: Oscar’s and his family’s stories, and the history of the Dominican Republic. By recovering personal experiences and not ceasing to tell stories and create narratives, a collective national diasporic identity can be recuperated.

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⁵⁷ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: The University of Texas Press 1994) 5.

⁵⁸ Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995) xii.

⁵⁹ Machado Sáez 523.

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