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"The beauty! The beauty!": Colonial Literary Legacies and Conquering the Female Body in Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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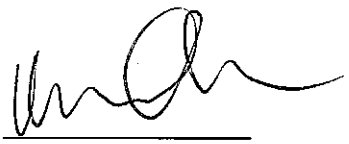
Primary Advisor Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* includes a plethora of references to everything from classic literature to modern pop culture. However, Díaz ends his novel with a reference to Joseph Conrad's colonial novella *Heart of Darkness,* therefore inviting readers to view *Oscar Wao* through a lens of colonial literature. This in turn results in a reconsideration of the current critical consensus surrounding the text's treatment of sexuality and masculinity in the modern Dominican diaspora, specifically that of Oscar, the novel's titular character.

In connecting *Oscar Wao* to *Heart of Darkness,* I analyze the text's and characters's violence against women as descendent of colonizing masculine figures and colonized feminine ones, central to *Oscar Wao.* These connections re-contextualize Oscar's final triumph as a colonizing act against the women with whom he interacts, and invites the reader to interrogate the ways in which authors deploy colonial literature and the colonial past in their works.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 300 pages into Junot Díaz's 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* the titular Oscar's narrator and erstwhile roommate, Yunior, describes Oscar this way: "He wasn't svelte by any stretch of the imagination, but he wasn't Joseph Conrad's wife no more, either" (271). Most obviously, this moment marks a change in Oscar's previously nonexistent love life and in his upwards climb to achieving traditional Dominican manhood—i.e., losing his virginity and being a "normal Dominican boy" (11). More than that, however, this moment is Yunior's first explicit reference to Victorian author Joseph Conrad, via his wife, and by association to Conrad's most famous work, colonial novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). This kind of literary reference appears throughout the text: Yunior peppers his chapters of *Oscar Wao* with allusions to everything from the *Fantastic Four* comic books to *Doctor Who* to, fittingly, Oscar Wilde, whose name inspires Oscar's nickname and therefore the novel's title. Moreover, given the novel's postcolonial 1970s setting and the fact that the most famous of Conrad adaptations, *Apocalypse Now,* was released to widespread acclaim in 1979, it's almost more surprising that Yunior does not name-drop Conrad sooner. Despite the plethora of these references, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'s invocation of Conrad, and in the novel's closing lines *Heart of Darkness* specifically, functions as a vital reintroduction to earlier conversations about postcolonialism and imperial legacies that appear particularly in the text's opening moments. This reintroduction therefore invites readers to view *Oscar Wao* through this *Heart of Darkness*-inspired lens of colonial literature, which in turn results in a reconsideration of the current critical consensus surrounding the text's treatment of sexuality and masculinity in the modern Dominican diaspora.

This allusion to Conrad works as what Douglas Lanier deems a "cameo appearance" in Shakespearean adaptation scholarship, "a passing reference… to recognizably Shakespearean lines, characters, or motifs separated from their source narratives" (Lanier 132). While Díaz is not in this case referencing Shakespeare, the cameo appearance nevertheless serves as a helpful framework through which to consider *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* and the role of Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* therein: as a callback to colonization and colonial literary works. But it does not only serve as an allusion to Conrad; this moment also highlights the ways in which Oscar has changed since his days as a "fat lonely nerdy kid", and intentionally ties that change to Oscar's masculinity (19). By saying that Oscar is no longer "Joseph Conrad's wife", Yunior implies that at one point he was—clearly linking Oscar's physical appearance and newfound (relative) success with women to his identity as a man. In short, Yunior effeminizes Oscar's past, painting Oscar's former self as a Victorian woman. Furthermore, this reference to Conrad invites a history of colonization into the text's interrogation of gender relations. Therefore, this cameo appearance serves as an important lens through which to examine Conrad's presence in *Oscar Wao*, and more broadly to consider colonial literary legacies and their effect upon the novel's presentation of both masculinity and gender relations.

Indeed, due to *Oscar Wao's* (mostly) American setting, the postcolonial significance of the Conrad appearances seem particularly minuscule, easily disappearing into the plethora of other pop culture references throughout the text. However, the allusion invokes an entire literary colonial history—one that appears in the novel's prologue and second epigraph but seems to fade afterwards, making way for Yunior's street slang and references to American nerd-dom. The prologue, describing the Dominican mythical curse fukú, begins by saying that "…it came first

from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; …it was the death bane of the Taínos,[1] uttered just as one world perished and other began" (Díaz 1). The novel's opening clearly describes the Dominican Republic's colonial history, and its horrors: the "screams of the enslaved," and the "death bane of the Taínos," respectively. Díaz sets up this postcolonial frame from the novel's beginning, and indeed even earlier: the second epigraph of *Oscar Wao* quotes Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner *Flight,*" calling attention to its postcolonial themes: "I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." Walcott's speaker's "sound colonial education" applies, as the reader soon discovers, to Yunior, as he spends the next three hundred pages establishing his Western credibility and knowledge of American culture through copious allusions to Western works.[2] But "The Schooner *Flight*" should bring to mind more than just a solid colonial education. The poem's partly-English speaker, its journey in and out of colonial centers, its obsession with language and poetry—these are hallmarks of *Oscar Wao.* But they are also hallmarks of postcolonial literature and specifically hallmarks of *Heart of Darkness*.[3] Surprisingly, however, as Díaz's novel continues, these colonial literary references become mostly obscured; the framework for the novel's "reinterpretation of Caribbean history"—and, it is implied, the *imperial* history of the Caribbean—shifts to the "primary [Western] fantasy intertext, *The Lord of*

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[1] The indigenous peoples native to the island of Hispaniola, where the Dominican Republic is located.

[2] Franz Fanon notes that education is often used as a tool of the colonizer, stating that "The colonialist bourgeoisie… expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. The native intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas, and deep down in his brain you could always find a vigilant sentinel ready to defend the Greco-Latin pedestal" (37).

[3] Walcott references *Heart of Darkness* in many of his works, including "Old New England" and his essay "Good Old Heart of Darkness".

the Rings" instead (Lazendörfer 127). In other words, while Díaz invites the postcolonial framework, the consistent allusions to fantasy show the "narrative's insistence on… the narrator's lens of fantasy, which alone seems capable of explaining that the best approximation for the history of the Dominican Republic is the marvelous reality of fantasy fiction" (Lazendörfer 129). Díaz's references to colonial and postcolonial literature, however, invite a colonial literary frame just as much as his fantasy references invite a *Lord of the Rings* or fantasy intertext. Therefore, while Yunior does not explicitly mention *Heart of Darkness* until nearly 300 pages into the text, and even then only in a seemingly throwaway line, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* plays with colonial literary history and symbolism from its opening pages.

While many critics consider the novel's postcolonial setting, by and large scholars have not chosen to trace *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao's* references to colonial literature, choosing instead to focus on the novel's fantasy elements or its depiction of hegemonic masculinity (defined by R.W. Connell as a system of masculinity that keeps femininity subordinate) or instead view history as the text's only postcolonial interface. Indeed, academia has largely ignored *Oscar Wao's* allusions to Joseph Conrad, and the problematic colonial history this reference invokes. The few who do examine these Conradian appearances read them differently—unlike myself, they see the final lines "The beauty! The beauty!" as a pushback to *Heart of Darkness*'s bleakness or even the apocalyptic ending of other postcolonial classics like Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude.* For example, Angel Gurrira-Quintera argues that the final lines are a "defiantly upbeat riposte to the famous ending of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Never has such a tragic tale been rounded off with such life-affirming last

words" (Gurrira-Quintera). Similarly, Monica Hanna sees Oscar's moment of realization as "the antithesis of Kurtz's proclamation ('The horror! The horror!')... [and] posits an ending that is markedly different from the apocalyptic vision of García Marquez's *Cien años de solidad"* (Hanna 516). Although these critics read the final lines of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a positive moment, a reclamation of Kurtz's last words, they fail to fully examine the consequences of using *Heart of Darkness,* a text explicitly about the imperial project, and Kurtz, the novella's cruelest, most inhumane colonizer, as originator of the language of Oscar's masculine achievements.[4] In short, grappling with the implications of the colonial literary tradition invoked in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* creates a necessary shift away from dominant readings of Oscar and the novel's final moments, and argues that *Oscar Wao's* men, even the untraditionally masculine ones, follow in the footsteps of colonizing hegemonic masculinity.

HEART OF DARKNESS AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

Kurtz's final exclamation, however—"The horror! The horror!"—functions as more than just a cameo appearance in the text. *Oscar Wao*'s riff on this phrase ("The beauty! The beauty!") comes as the *literal* last words in the novel: they are the final lines—after the chapter titled "The End of the Story" and after Yunior's imaginary meeting with Oscar's niece—appearing in "The Final Letter" from Oscar to Yunior. Even aside from the importance of this allusion's position at the very end of the novel, Richard J. Hand argues that "If Conrad has added anything to the language of the contemporary world it is two things: the title *Heart of Darkness* and its key phrase, "The horror! The horror!" (136). He elaborates, saying that "Conrad provides a source

[4] I argue that the mere reference to a text so fraught with racial and imperialist assumptions automatically frames Oscar's moment of transcendence as problematic.

for intertext, analogue, adaptation and appropriation not just in his stories but even his turn of phrase" (Hand 137). Here, Hand points out that the mere use of a Conradian phrase, particularly one as famous as "The horror! The horror!", qualifies a piece as an adaptation or appropriation, and therefore deserves to be read and analyzed in context with Conrad. Moreover, due to *Heart of Darkness*'s status as a "classic of modernism and a central text in ongoing debates about race and empire", it serves as a foundational text in colonial literature: an "indispensable reference point in an ever-extending series of debates… about… the legacies of colonialism and the continuing effects of empire, [and] the construction of sexuality and gender…" (Armstrong ix). Invoking *Heart of Darkness,* therefore, as Díaz does at the end of *Oscar Wao*, does more than simply add another literary reference to the scores of callbacks and allusions already scattered throughout the text. Instead, a reworking of "The horror! The horror!", however brief, brings with it an entire literary history of colonization, and deserves to be read in conjunction with said literary tradition.

Using *Heart of Darkness* as the novel's final words moreover invites a consideration of the structural parallels in both texts—presenting *Oscar Wao* as, at the very least, a unintentional grappling with *Heart of Darkness's* themes and legacy, and at most a very loose adaptation of Conrad's famous novella. Certainly the plots have similarities. In both texts, a man visits the colonized world (the Belgian Congo in *Heart of Darkness,* the Dominican Republic in *Oscar Wao*) as a part of the colonial project, dies there, and leaves his story in the hands of a friend by whom he feels understood. While Kurtz enters the Congo in order to conquer and claim its land, and become wealthy in the process off of ivory, Oscar wants to lose his virginity and finally become a Dominican man—also by conquest, albeit this time a conquest of a woman and not a

place. Moreover, Yunior and Marlow share similar disgust and fascination towards Oscar and Kurtz, respectively; both begin their journey with revulsion. Yunior mentions that he would occasionally invite Oscar "out with me and the boys. Not anything serious—just out for a drink when it was a crowd of us and his monstro-ness wouldn't show so much" (Díaz 176). Here, Yunior is not only ashamed enough of Oscar to only allow him to join "the boys" when he does not think it will negatively affect his image, but resorts to name-calling in order to further derogate Oscar. Furthermore, Yunior calls Oscar a monster, actively dehumanizing him the process. Despite the different dynamic between the menacing Kurtz and the unthreatening Oscar, Marlow's opinions of Kurtz are, at least initially, the same as Yunior's towards Oscar. While Marlow hears conflicting reports of Kurtz and his greatness over the course of his trip down the Congo River, his first reaction to Kurtz's direct actions—that of putting heads on stakes around Kurtz's campground—is horror. He emphatically tells his companions that he does not "want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr Kurtz… such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows" (Conrad 58). Marlow's use of the word "intolerable" emphasizes the depth of his repugnance. Later, of course, both Marlow and Yunior move into a conflicted admiration of Kurtz and Oscar, and both end up telling their stories after the two men's deaths. These structural similarities only make the *Heart of Darkness* appearances more important in the text, as they perhaps unintentionally reinforce the lens of imperialism and colonial literature that the allusions invite.

In order to recognize, however, the literary history of colonization that *Heart of Darkness* invokes, one must understand the historical colonial background to the novella's unnamed (but

widely understood to be what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) setting. The Congo was personally purchased by King Leopold II of Belgium in 1885, after years of searching for an appropriate place in which to begin a colony. Leopold II renamed it the Congo Free State, and stripped the Congo of its vast natural resources. Lack of humanitarian oversight, disorganization, and a general apathy towards the plight of the colonized led to a holocaust of untold millions of Congolese, a system which men like *Heart of Darkness's* fictional Kurtz exploited for personal gain. As knowledge of the literal horrors gradually leaked out, European humanitarians called for reform and a taking to task of Leopold II. Although the Congo was formally annexed away from Leopold II in 1908, and became a colony of the Belgian state instead of a personal colony of the king, it did not become independent until 1960. Moreover, the Democratic Republic of the Congo still suffers from political unrest and decades of war. This context is vital to *Heart of Darkness* and to tracing the enduring damage of colonization, even after the imperial power has left the colony, all the way through to the present day.[5]

Like *Heart of Darkness* and the Congo, *Oscar Wao's* postcolonial diasporic Dominican background must be understood in light of the Dominican Republic's history of colonization and slavery. While the native Taínos called the island that would become modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic *Ayiti*[6] in Arawakan, the Spanish renamed it to Hispaniola when they arrived —an imperialist move repeated over and over again by colonizing European forces. Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492, and, after a short mining industry that mostly failed within ten years, the slave trade began in earnest on the island that would become modern-day

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[5] I take this information from historian Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost,* which movingly relates the Congo tragedy and includes an entire chapter on *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's potential inspiration.

[6] As recorded by Pietro Martire d'Anghiera in 1457-1562.

Haiti and the Dominican Republic with the dawn of the sugar industry and the approval of the Spanish monarchy (Palmer 13). Indeed, the transatlantic slave trade was so widespread that by 1510 that "Ferdinand urged that African slave labour be used in place of that of the [Taínos] because the latter were 'weak and of little strength'" (Palmer 13). In fact, Hispaniola was the first colony in the Caribbean to participate in the slave trade—slavery quickly spread from there to Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. As the indigenous population, like that of the Congo years later, shrank due to disease and violence, the presence of imported African slaves only grew—and with them, a transatlantic "movement of culture, ideas and world views" also spread, creating a new culture forged from the diasporic African experience blended with the native islanders and European influence (Palmer 21). As the presence of slaves grew, so too did the breadth of the slave traders: no longer just Spaniards, the arrival of English, Dutch, and French plantations and ships "proved the source of much competition" for control of the slave trade (Palmer 41). Hispaniola was unified in 1822 after three hundred years under Spanish rule, and the Dominican Republic declared independence from Haiti in 1844, permanently outlawing slavery in the process despite a brief Spanish re-annexation in 1861 (Eltis 66). After a period of national instability, American occupation, and a bloody rise to power, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina became president in 1930—and, in Yunior's words, "ruled the Dominican Republic... with an implacable ruthless brutality" (Díaz 2). As evidenced, the Dominican Republic's unstable history, characterized by conquest, slavery, near-destruction of an entire native population, and dictatorship, should deeply inform any reading of *Oscar Wao* and the colonizing factors therein.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND COLONIAL GENDER RELATIONS

In order, however, to fully grasp the importance of the *Heart of Darkness* cameos in the text, and their relation to the colonial factors at play, one must first understand the role sexuality performs in the novel's portrayal of Dominican masculinity. As John Riofrio explains, "In Latin America, discussions of masculinity have long been dominated by the notion of *machismo*, a manliness that overpowers and in fact seems to spill over, an excess of masculinity" (27). Riofrio points out that Latin American *machismo* centers on over-the-top sexual prowess and virility.[7] Indeed, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* begins, post-prologue, with a description of Oscar's luck with the ladies—or rather, his lack thereof. In this moment, Yunior comments on Oscar's "un-Dominican" singleness (11). This initial connection between Oscar's "nascent pimpliness" and being a "'normal' Dominican boy" signals the greater role hegemonic masculinities —a system of gendered practices that keeps masculinity in power and femininity subordinate[8]— relate to Oscar's development of a diasporic national identity throughout the rest of the novel (Díaz 11). Yunior, however, does not present Oscar as participating in this hegemonic masculinity. Rather, he presents Oscar's untraditional sensitivity and (unwilling) celibacy as an ameliorative masculinity, less toxic and perhaps even deserving of emulation, in comparison with that of the novel's other major characters—including Yunior himself. Both Katherine Weese and Monica Hanna, among other scholars, agree with this reading, viewing Oscar's example as a positive form of masculinity in the text. Hanna states that the novel's ending is far from pessimistic. She sees Oscar's loss of virginity as a triumph for his character and as a symbol of

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[7] Riofrio emphasizes this point and provides a broader reading of machismo in Díaz's short story collection in his excellent essay "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy and Emasculation in Junot Díaz's *Drown.*"

[8] This is R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which I explain further in a following paragraph.

hope for future generations. Likewise, Weese reads Díaz's fragmented narration as pointing to "alternative masculinities" for both Yunior and Oscar. Because Oscar is at least initially very different from the hypersexual Yunior as well as other Dominican men in the text, both outside critics and the novel itself read him as the antithesis of the problematic Dominican sexuality that so informs Dominican masculinity.

However, upon viewing Oscar's masculinity in light of the novel's structure, postcolonial setting, and particularly its connections with *Heart of Darkness* and a greater literary legacy of colonization, a less redemptive reading emerges. In framing Oscar's quest for self-actualization and masculine acceptance as a quest to lose his virginity, Díaz directly associates masculinity with the conquering of female bodies—an inherently toxic equation that mirrors both the colonization of Oscar's native Dominican Republic and the horrific colonization of the Congo portrayed in *Heart of Darkness*. Since sexuality in *Oscar Wao* is nearly always violent, specifically towards women, making Oscar's narrative arc focus on his sexuality turns him into another manifestation of toxic masculinity—one all the more insidious for its subtlety. Moreover, by linking Oscar's sexuality to distinctly violent and colonial imagery, especially through the references to *Heart of Darkness*, even as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* presents Oscar himself as a critique of hegemonic masculinity, its depiction of his sexuality and the invocation of Conrad's famous text troubles this by equating his quest for sex to the very toxic, colonizing masculinity he supposedly rejects.

R. W. Connell's groundbreaking *Masculinities* (2005) and Todd W. Reeser's *Masculinities in Theory* (2010) provide a helpful theoretical base when considering the physical importance of the body and hegemonic masculinity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In

Masculinities, Connell argues that "The body… is inescapable in the construction of masculinity," because "Masculine gender is… a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions… certain possibilities in sex" (Connell 56, 52-53). Importantly, Connell points out that while social construction is important to understandings of gender and sexuality, the physicality of the body deeply affects masculine or feminine experience. By examining masculinity in relation to sexuality, in particular, Connell describes the importance of what she calls the "First Fuck"—an experience that moves beyond sexuality and into an "intimate connection that operates especially in the dimension of fantasy" (Connell 60-61). Considering the magical realism aspects of the novel, Oscar's enduring quest to lose his virginity, and its almost redemptive, spiritual quality in the work, this framing is particularly apt in its explanation of the importance an initial sexual experience—or the idea of one—can have for men or masculine-identifying figures. Furthermore, the novel's consistent concern with Dominican male sexuality and its manifestation in both Oscar and Yunior, respectively, ties into Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which… guarantees… the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). In the context of *Oscar Wao*, the often violent, unhealthy sexual relationships exactly fit Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity and play into the novel's broader themes of power and dictatorship. Todd W. Reeser elaborates on Connell's thoughts, arguing that "hegemonic masculinity is thought of as a model not only inextricable from subordination, but also very much dependent on it for its own definition" (Reeser 14). In other words, nontoxic hegemonic masculinity does not exist, because by definition hegemonic masculinity relies upon the oppression or marginalization of traditionally non-masculine figures. This dynamic, for example,

explains Yunior's penchant for effeminizing the less traditionally masculine Oscar. Viewing *Oscar Wao* and its central characters through these lenses of masculinity, sexuality, and the body therefore allows an understanding of the novel that questions the supposedly redemptive masculinity Oscar finds and offers a more subversive reading instead.

Indeed, because Díaz draws careful parallels between hypersexual masculinity and violence towards the female body, a complete reading of *Oscar Wao*'s engagement with hegemonic masculinity *must* examine the presence of the female body and the violence inflicted upon it—particularly because of the novel's postcolonial setting and because sexuality ingrains itself so deeply in Dominican masculinity. Colonial literature has a long history of representing the colonizer as a masculine figure and the colonized as a feminine figure, tying the conquest of the land to the sexualization and conquest of the female body. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* discusses Edward Said's position that "Orientalism takes perverse shape as a 'male power-fantasy' that sexualizes a feminized Orient for Western power and possession": a literal colonization of the female body (14). But McClintock emphasizes the importance of reading sexuality as more than just metaphor, as to do so "runs the risk of eliding *gender* as a constitutive dynamic of imperial and anti-imperial power" (14). *Imperial Leather* therefore examines the ways in which imperialist ideology manifested in gendered and racialized language. These fraught gender relations, however, are not absent from sexuality. As Robert Young notes of the colonial world,

> It is clear that...the extended exchange of property... originated, indeed, as much as an exchange of bodies as of goods, or rather of bodies as goods: as in that paradigm of

> respectability, marriage, economic and sexual exchange were intimately bound up, coupled with each other, from the very first. (161)

Young's emphasis on sexuality, and on the inherent commodification of the body (particularly that of women and the Other) in colonization through slavery and other forms of forced labor serves as a vital lens through which to view Oscar's quest to lose his virginity. As Young and McClintock agree, any gender critique of a postcolonial work must include an understanding of postcolonial gender relations, and of the effect the colonial past has upon sexuality and masculinity.

TRUJILLO AND DOMINICAN MASCULINITY

The hypersexual, hyper violent Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo serves as the perfect example of the effect of this colonial past—particularly because the Dominican diaspora, Oscar and Yunior included, takes its masculine cues from him. Early on, Yunior offers Trujillo as an example of unquestionable Dominican masculinity. In the opening chapter, Yunior describes Trujillo in a footnote as "com[ing] to control... the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a... mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror" (2). This emphasis on hegemonically masculine traits, specifically violence and rape, present Trujillo as the epitome of toxic masculinity in the novel. Moreover, Trujillo's incredible masculine power extended to more than just the political sphere: he also "fuck[ed] every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women" (Díaz 2). The specific wording of "thousands upon thousands" conveys Trujillo's incredible scale: in *Oscar Wao,* Trujillo is Dominican masculinity in the extreme—just as Oscar's lack of sexual experience calls his masculinity into question, Trujillo's excess of sexual conquests specifically makes him a

Dominican man. Importantly, however, it also makes Trujillo's masculinity a direct descendent of the Dominican Republic's imperial past:

> Today's hegemonic notions of masculinity [in the Dominican Republic] were consolidated during the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930– 1961) and thus are in many ways a distinctly modern formation. In turn, Trujillo's own pervasively hypervirile discourse was, at least in part, a strategic response to the imperial and racialized notions of masculinity that accompanied the U.S. presence in the country, especially during the U.S. military occupation (1916– 1924). (Horn 2)

This hypervirile, hypersexual discourse, Horn argues, is the continuing legacy of the colonial trauma wreaked upon the island and its inhabitants. Moreover, this legacy implicates *Oscar Wao's* main characters in its vision of hegemonic masculinity, whether by their ability to attain it or their failure to measure up.[9] Early on, Yunior informs the reader that being a "normal Dominican boy" means "ha[ving] luck with the ladies": not having it makes Oscar "*very* un-Dominican", even at the age of seven (Díaz 11). The fact that, according to Yunior, Oscar's childhood dating habits directly affect his nationality— whether or not he's Dominican— exemplifies the importance of sexuality in both gender and national identity. If Oscar is not a "player," the text implies, then he is not truly Dominican, casting his nationality in doubt. This consistent pairing of masculinity, sexuality and nationality thus shows *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a text deeply concerned with imperial, hegemonic masculinity and its particular legacies in modern Dominican identity.

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[9] Indeed, masculinity theorists including R.W. Connell and Todd Reeser note that hegemonic masculinity is impossible to attain, as a man can never be unfeminine enough.

In light of this Dominican history of hegemonic masculinity, many critics read Yunior's narration in *Oscar Wao* as a rewriting of the narrative Trujillo dictated, and as an attempt to challenge these very ideas of hegemonic colonial masculinity. Sean P. O'Brien reads *Oscar Wao* in light of marginalization and literary competence, and the way the fractured narrative forces the reader to do some research in order to fully—or even partially—understand the text. Also examining the novel's frequent narrative disruptions, Tim Lanzendörfer's "The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" analyzes the connection between Yunior's fantasy references and the Dominican Republic's history of colonization and dictatorship. Lanzendörfer argues that Oscar Wao presents a Dominican past that no fantasy can measure up to: even Tolkien's Sauron pales in comparison to Trujillo (Lanzendörfer 139). As mentioned earlier, Katherine Weese argues in "'Tú No Eres Nada De Dominicano': Unnatural Narration and De-Naturalizing Gender Constructs in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" that Yunior's unconventional narration serves as a disruption of Trujillo's narrative and therefore of hegemonic masculinity, and importantly, that Oscar himself presents a new and much more positive vision of masculinity in the text. Overall, most critics read the novel's fractured narrative and constant referencing of other works as a subversive attempt to push back against imperial hegemonic masculinity, as embodied in Trujillo.

But although most scholars view the novel as a reclamation against Trujillo's narrative, several disagree, reading Díaz's novel as far more complicit in the hegemonic masculinity Trujillo presents than critical of it. As Jason Cortés notes, "In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, violence articulated through sexuality and power becomes a problematic trait of

heteronormative masculinity, which is not solely portrayed by means of the subjugation of women, but of men as well, resorting to images and practices of sadistic humiliation and torture." Here, Cortés notes that the masculinity portrayed in the text wreaks havoc on men as well as women. Likewise, Elena Machado Suez's "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance" recognizes a different thread. Machado Suez reads Yunior's authorial dictatorship as inevitably linking him to Trujillo, and views his ultimately successful attempts to reshape Oscar into a traditional example of Dominican masculinity as playing directly into Trujillo's vision of the Dominican Republic. Machado Suez describes Yunior as "not only enact[ing] a narrative dictatorship but becom[ing] the spokesperson for a disturbing model of diasporic masculinity that the novel figures as a by-product of dictatorship" (Machado Suez 544). In noting the similarities between Trujillo and Yunior, Machedo Suez finds *Oscar Wao* far less salvific than most critics do in its critique of hegemonic masculinity, and offers a much more fraught reading of the novel. Like Machedo Suez, Maja Horn notes that "Without doubt, Junot Díaz's writing is strongly critical of Dominican hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality; nonetheless, I suggest that his novel… remains caught up in the lasting desirability and lures of hegemonic Dominican masculinity," pointing specifically to the novel's division of women into "good" and "bad" subcategories (130). While the general critical consensus notes Díaz's critique of Trujillo's colonial legacy, passed down from colonial times to the modern, native members of the Dominican Republic despite the absence of the colonizer, several scholars do see the text as more troubled in its gender relations.

COLONIZING THE FEMALE BODY

Indeed, some of these most troubling moments appear via the parallels Díaz draws between hypersexual masculinity and violence towards the female body. Early on, Yunior lingers excessively over the physical details of nearly every female body in the text. For example, when Oscar's childhood sweetheart, Maritza, appears as a fully-grown adult, Yunior describes her hair as "black and lush as a thunderhead, probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than [Oscar's] sister's... body fine enough to make men forget their infirmities" (Díaz 18). Later, he notes that only the "size of Maritza's ass" changed in the years of Oscar's adolescence (Díaz 18). Although Maritza makes only a brief appearance in the novel, Yunior still catalogues her looks—specifically her sexual appeal, as evidenced by her "fine body" and the "size of [her] ass"—as if he were archiving a piece of art for auction. In commenting on her looks in such specific detail, Yunior declares implicit ownership: that he has the right to describe her, to catalogue her body, not because of a connection to her, but simply because of his proximity to her. This catalogue of a woman's body comes from a long literary tradition, apparent as far back as the Renaissance blazon[10], and carries with it mercenary and economic connotations, of a man describing his "goods" in order to sell them—or, in this case, her. This assumed ownership proves even more problematic when the reader sees Maritza's fate: an abused girlfriend, and one who, "from what Oscar could see, ...seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends" (Díaz 18). Not only does this serve as an initial example of the consistent abuse of women throughout the text, but it also shows Oscar's own backwards

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[10] Indeed, the term blazon comes from a economic tradition: it is used in the "fair, marketplace, or public square. It is the utterance of the merchant vaunting his wares" (Green 276). When used in Renaissance literature, it becomes a systematic catalogue of a woman's body, as in Shakespeare's "My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun". The mercenary background adds troubling undertones, portraying the woman as an object to be bought and sold.

thinking: he believes that she "delights" in it. *Delight,* in particular, infers something stronger than just tolerance. It implies that Maritza *enjoys* her abuse, a textbook example of rape culture —of the ways "physical and emotional terrorism against women... [is] present[ed]... as the norm" (Harding 2). In other words, because Oscar believes that Maritza actively likes being "slapped around", because he buys so readily into the belief of women's desire to be subjugated, he already portrays elements of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore through the preliminary example of Maritza, *Oscar Wao* imagines its women as sexualized subordinates who passively accept and even enjoy the abuse inflicted upon their bodies.

Oscar's belief that women enjoy their abuse, however, more than just enforces this hegemonically masculine agenda about the subordination of women: it mirrors imperialist thought about the nature of the colonized, as exemplified in *Heart of Darkness*. Imperialism justified itself partially with.the idea that the colonizer wanted to help the colonized by leading them out of intellectual, "primitive" darkness and into Western enlightenment. In *Heart of Darkness,* Marlow exemplifies this exact line of thinking. He says that a "savage" Congolese crew member on their steamboat is "an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler… to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap" (Conrad 36). Marlow's use of the term "improved specimen" implies that the crew member has been "bettered" by the imperial project—although even the imperial project can do no better than create a "dog… walking on his hind legs" out of a native Congolese, showing Marlow's deep-set bias against them. Marlow's condescending language shows the extent to which he believes the Congolese are improved by the colonizers, a strain of thought also apparent in nonfictional

accounts of the Congo. As King Leopold II, the instigator of the Congo colonization, stated in 1898, "...the natives... will see in [our agents] the all-powerful protectors of their lives and their property, benevolent teachers of whom they have so great a need" (Leopold 120). This concept of "bettering" the colonized and being ultimately thanked for colonization ties in specifically to Oscar's ideas about Maritza: like the colonized, Oscar implies, she sees men as all powerful protectors, and "delights" in their abuses. Recognizing Díaz's coding of the feminine body as colonized thus offers a new way to read *Oscar Wao* in light of its postcolonial background and of the gender commentary that forms the book's backbone.

Maritza, however, is far from the novel's most important example of objectification, colonization, and sexualized violence: that title instead goes to Oscar's mother Beli and her affair with the Gangster. Objectification of and violence towards Beli infuses every aspect of their relationship, and it particularly appears in their first meeting in the El Hollywood club. The Gangster sees Beli dancing ("had been scoping Beli for the better part of an hour"), and when she refuses to let him buy her a drink, he "grab[s] her arm, hard..." (Díaz 115). The amount of time it takes for the Gangster to turn violent in this example —literally the space of a question and an answer—speaks to the assumption of women's powerlessness and the prevalence of violent masculinity. Beli, unappreciative of the touch, attacks him; the Gangster remains frustratingly calm. Interestingly, however, no one intervenes while Beli "unleashe[s] one of the great Street Fighter chain attacks of all time"—neither then nor before, when the Gangster first grabbed her arm (Díaz 115). This directly shows the commonality of sexualized violence in the Dominican Republic. The Gangster waits for her to stop, and, when she does, comments that she "missed a spot" on his lips (Díaz 116). Here, the Gangster's equating of an attack to a kiss

explicitly links sexuality and violence, a combination that informs the rest of their interactions. Moreover, when she finally tells him her name ("Hypatía Belicia Cabral"), the Gangster says, "No.... Your name is Beautiful" (Díaz 118). This renaming is a colonizing act: the Gangster looks at Beli as something to be used and changes her name from the one she used before, just as her native land's Spanish colonizers renamed the island from Ayiti to Hispaniola. This renaming of her is also, moreover, a violent act, albeit not physically. In denying her name and giving her a new one based only on her physical characteristics, the Gangster not only strips Beli of her identity, he also reshapes her into an object, a thing valued for its looks and not its personhood. No longer a person to the Gangster, the novel presents Beli here as fully colonized, renamed, reborn as an aesthetically pleasing object, and nothing more.

Because *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, like its eponymous character, a deeply intersectional text, it must be read in conversation with the Dominican Republic's history of colonization and violence in relation to sexuality, masculinity, and the female body. The novel's initial framework of Dominican masculinity as defined by sexual prowess (exemplified in Trujillo and Yunior, and by Oscar's *lack* of sexual prowess) informs every other sexual/romantic relationship in the text. In *Oscar Wao,* male sexuality is always about something else—about being masculine, about being Dominican, about being more than just a "GhettoNerd", as Yunior describes Oscar (Díaz 11). Male sexuality, however, does not exist in a vacuum: as evidenced throughout the novel and especially in Beli, hegemonic masculinity wreaks violence upon the feminine figures it meets. This masculinity-on-femininity coded violence mirrors postcolonial theory wherein colonizers view the land as feminine, and their conquest thereof as a distinctly masculine endeavor. In light of Oscar's Dominican background, and the importance Dominican

colonial history plays throughout the text, one cannot analyze sexuality or gender in *Oscar Wao* without this postcolonial framework. Furthermore, when taking each of these separate theoretical frames into account, Oscar's view of sexuality and masculinity becomes increasingly fraught. The novel's intersections of gender, sexuality, and imperial legacies are each a part of Oscar's personal background, and should therefore be acknowledged in an analysis of his character.

RE-READING OSCAR

Certainly, in comparison with Trujillo and to a lesser extent Yunior, viewing Oscar as the novel's example of ameliorative masculinity is tempting. After all, Trujillo's history of sexuality involves rape and, again, "thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women"; his history of violence is genocide (Díaz 3). Yunior's scale is smaller but equally troubling; he describes himself as "fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; [I] had pussy coming out of my ears..." (185). In terms of violence, while Yunior does not actively commit genocide, he does consistently downplay his own violent tendencies: shoving Oscar into a wall[11], for example, or consistently writing stories centered around robbery and gunshots[12]. It is easy, then, in light of these, to accept Oscar as a positive example—a man whose sexuality does not threaten women, a man who cares more about his sensitive writerly dreams than about asserting his masculinity through violence. Even the novel's title enforces this: Díaz calls Oscar's life *wondrous*, a positive term, one that predisposes the reader to relate to Oscar from before the

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[11] Díaz 179

[12] Díaz 173

novel even begins. Because Díaz does not initially present Oscar as hypersexual or violent like Yunior and Trujillo, Oscar's masculinity can at first seem positive.

However, a close reading of Oscar's views towards sexuality and virginity begins to show telling, hegemonically masculine ideas: specifically, Oscar's belief that losing his virginity will redeem his masculinity. For example, Yunior mentions that "...I thought *I* was into females, but no one, and I mean *no one,* was into them the way Oscar was. To him they were the beginning and end, the Alpha and the Omega, the DC and the Marvel." (Díaz 174) Yunior links himself to Oscar here in terms of their love of women, but moreover he shows that *Oscar* is more obsessed with women (and, in this context, sex) than the hyper-sexual Yunior with "pussy coming out of my ears". Furthermore, the Alpha and Omega is a term used for Jesus[13]—specifically in the context of Revelation, when he comes back to earth and saves his people, glorifying their bodies and taking them back to heaven. Yunior's religious parallels here show the importance Oscar places on women, and their ability to "redeem" him from his previously established un-Dominican virginity. Viewing sexuality as a religious experience, as Oscar's "saving grace", sets up an unhealthy view of female salvific power. Oscar's first brief kiss with Ybón only exacerbates this view; it brings to mind Connell's concept of the First Fuck, and the lasting emotional impression it can have. During the kiss, Oscar's thoughts specifically invoke an ability to access some kind of higher power, due to his newfound romantic/sexual experience: "...then there were lights all around them and he thought I'm going to transcend! Transcendence is miiine!" (Díaz 294). Using the word *transcend* offers an idea of moving beyond a normal human experience, of achieving something—but the problem lies in the way Oscar reaches his

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[13] Revelation 22:13

transcendence, i.e., through Ybón. In her sexuality, her Dominican, female body—already established as a site of conflicted identities and tensions—Oscar looks for, and appears to find, the redemption he seeks. Sadly, he only finds it by sexualizing and using the women in his life.

However, when these women decide *not* to give him what he wants, Oscar turns violent —further paralleling Trujillo and Yunior, and showcasing the extent to which his masculinity depends on the subordination of women. When Oscar meets a girl named Jenni (whom Yunior refers to in the text as "La Jablesse", or the name of a female demon from Caribbean folklore), it initially inspires him towards a regimen of self- improvement: "[Oscar] was like I'd never seen him, love the transformer. Started dressing up more, ironing his shorts every morning.... Even started running again!" (Díaz 185) The extra care and effort Oscar puts into himself as he grows (platonically) closer to Jenni demonstrate how important he finds their relationship. This in itself is not problematic or toxic. However, once Oscar finds her having sex with someone else, he turns violent. Oscar "went berserk," in Yunior's words: "Called her a whore and attacked her walls, tearing down her posters and throwing her books everywhere." (Díaz 187) In calling her a whore, Oscar reveals his anger as fueled by his own sexual frustration. Oscar's actions here show his expectations of Jenni—that because they were friends, because he attempted to change himself into a more traditionally attractive person, he *deserved* sexual gratification from her. Like the Gangster with Beli or Yunior with Maritza, Oscar sees himself as entitled to comment on how Jenni uses her body and to become angry when she does not use it to please him. Oscar's objectification of Jenni—that she only exists for his sexual benefit, and not to make decisions as her own person—mirrors other hegemonically masculine actions in the text. In short, Oscar does not want Jenni to be a person. He wants her to fit his specific view of what a girlfriend/love

interest/woman should act like, and when she does not conform, he threatens her to reaffirm his masculinity and perhaps attempt to scare her into compliance. Oscar's view of women as subordinate, as only existing in relation to himself, is textbook hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, it firmly puts Oscar in the same position as Yunior, the Gangster, Trujillo, and the novel's colonizing past—even when that position does not immediately appear obvious.

The culmination of Oscar's hegemonic masculinity, however, happens when he finally *does* lose his virginity, referencing *Heart of Darkness* and following in Kurtz's footsteps as a perpetuator of colonization. Considering the importance of sexuality to Dominican masculinity, Oscar's First Fuck serves almost as a graduation ceremony—he has finally become a true Dominican man, and is no longer "against the laws of nature" in his identity. Initially, like most things in relation to Oscar, the scene seems sweet, even romantic. In the moments following their sexual encounter, "what really got [Oscar] was… the little intimacies, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap…" (Díaz 334). But upon further analysis, these "little intimacies" become troubling. First, each of these moments links to physicality, to the female body, a space already fraught with colonial history. The catalogue of Ybón's body here—her hair, her underwear, her naked body, her body in a sexual position with him—hearkens back to Yunior's earlier cataloguing of Maritza's body, and to McClintock's recognition in *Imperial Leather* about the female body as a colonized space. Oscar's catalogue, like Yunior's before him and the literary tradition of blazons, claims ownership over Ybón's body, presenting him as a colonizing force.

This parallel becomes particularly important in light of the novel's end, when Oscar describes his thoughts at the moment of climax. The final lines detail "the beauty" of Oscar's

sexual discoveries—but only do so in ways that immediately recall *Heart of Darkness* and the colonial literary canon. He exclaims, "So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (Díaz 335). This obvious parallel to Kurtz's dying words in the depths of the Congo—"The horror! The horror!"—explicitly invokes the atrocious colonizing past of the Congo and, because of *Oscar Wao's* postcolonial setting, the Dominican Republic (Conrad 69). This moment does not only bring to mind general colonizing practices, however. It also references a specific colonizing figure: Kurtz, architect of *Heart of Darkness*'s cruelest inhumanities. In other words, throughout Oscar's First Fuck, Díaz explicitly, even if unintentionally, aligns Oscar with not only colonial history in general, but also colonial literature's premiere colonizing figure, perpetrator of one of the most violent colonizations in world history.

While critics[14] see this reference as an upbeat revision of *Heart of Darkness*'s ending, one cannot revise the literary history of colonization so easily. Because of *Heart of Darkness's* place in the colonial literary canon, and *Oscar Wao's* postcolonial setting, a brief appearance of *Heart of Darkness* functions as something greater than just a callback to a famous novella, or a rewrite of a tragic ending; it also serves as an important reminder of the colonial past that so informs the Dominican diaspora. Moreover, using the quote "The horror! The horror!" implies not only colonization and imperialism in a broad sense as the novella's major theme, but specifically the colonizer as a presence in the text. The lines "The horror! The horror!" are spoken by Kurtz, a man the novel presents as a "murderer, perhaps a cannibal", one who has "decorated his corner of hell with the skulls of his victims" (Brantlinger 391). Indeed, Kurtz is *the* colonizing figure in

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[14] such as Monica Hanna in "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."

the text—he embodies a "murderous, imperialist categorical imperative." (Brantlinger 393). Therefore, using *Heart of Darkness* as an intertext requires not only an understanding of the colonial history that Conrad's novella exists in, but also an understanding of the depths of the atrocities that it includes: namely, the holocaust of millions of Congolese, at the hands of colonizing figures such as Kurtz. A reference to "The horror! The horror!" in a Dominican Republic-set postcolonial novel with its own history of native annihilation (Hispaniola's Taínos) cannot simply be a reference to an evocative line. Instead, it is an invocation to the worst horrors of colonization, and the colonizing figures at the center of them, painting Oscar's First Fuck not as a romantic, sweet experience filled with "little intimacies", but rather as a distinctly violent, colonizing act against the female body. In doing so, the novel portrays Oscar not as a sensitive nerd pushing back against Trujillo's narrative of colonization, but rather as a colonizer himself—a man who has inherited the legacies of imperialism and perpetuates them against the women in his life.

In short, one cannot read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'s engagement with sexuality and masculinity without addressing the looming, spectral shadow of the colonizer as a figure of hegemonic masculinity and the female body as a manifestation of the colonized. While critics implicate Trujillo and to a lesser extent Yunior in this vision of problematic, colonizing masculinity, they often gloss over Oscar's complicity in these hegemonic structures. But like Trujillo and Yunior, Oscar also sees women as supportive figures, as objects to prop up his masculinity through sexual availability. Oscar's First Fuck in the final chapter is "a testament to the dangerous lure of beautiful endings": while it may initially seem to be a redemptive, salvific way to end the novel, the scene's dark underbelly of colonization and violence mirrors Oscar's

subtle, problematic interactions with women throughout the rest of the text (Hanna 552). For while Oscar spends the whole novel attempting to lose his virginity in order to become a traditional Dominican man, he does not realize that he has already reached the hegemonically masculine ideal in so many other ways. Ultimately, Oscar's character and masculinity are far from redemptive or even positive in the novel's broader context. The final chapter only completes Oscar's movement into traditional Dominican masculinity, taking his place beside Yunior, the Gangster, Trujillo, and a five-hundred-year history of violence and colonization.

MASCULINITY AND THE COLONIAL PRESENT

Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* points out the important debate about the term postcolonial: namely, that "if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism" as one interpretation of the term postcolonial implies (7). Initially, Oscar appears to be fully postcolonial: informed and affected by the colonial past, yes, but able to move beyond it into a present more influenced by America and the West than the Dominican Republic. Oscar grows up in Paterson, New Jersey, and attends an all-boys Catholic high school. Moreover, his interests are deeply informed by American pop culture. Although Yunior speculates that his love of fantasy and science-fiction might be because Oscar is Antillean ("who more sci-fi than us?"), the fact remains that Oscar "could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-play fanatic" (Díaz 21). His nerd passions are rooted in Western literature, culture, and film. Unlike his mother, Beli, whose story is almost entirely set in the Dominican Republic, and his sister Lola, who spends years there in her first-person-narrated chapters, the reader does not spend

significant time with Oscar in the Dominican Republic until the novel's final fifty pages, although he does visit it off-page before then. This extended return to Oscar's homeland is also a return to the site of hundreds of years of colonial atrocities, and a movement away from the diaspora and Western pop culture back to the colonial past. This fact, coupled with the final lines of the novel, severely undermines the assumption of postcolonialism by positioning Oscar as colonizer in the vein of Kurtz, Trujillo, the Gangster, and Yunior. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* in other words, may present Oscar as a postcolonial figure in his pop cultural obsessions, but by moving Oscar into the colonizer position, it deeply questions the ability of a place and a people to move past colonial trauma.

Interestingly, however, this is not how Junot Díaz sees his novel, or Oscar himself. In a 2012 interview, when asked about "what helps Oscar see 'the beauty, the beauty'" at the end of the text, Díaz answers that "...when I think about Oscar's transformation, his transformation is the realization that... what he really longed for in the end is intimacy and not sex. Most of us, I think it takes a long time to realize the errors of our patterns, but Oscar sort of gets it on the first go... I like that about him" (Akabos). While Díaz's reading presents Oscar as a man who learns from the culture of toxic masculinity around him and eventually prizes intimacy instead of sex, it also implicitly positions Ybón as the tool through which Oscar learns—as nothing more than a means to an end on his journey of self-actualization. As Brittany Lee Frederick writes of the final story in Díaz's collection *This Is How You Lose Her,* "You as the reader are being asked to read and empathize with the abuser throughout the collection's last story, with little thought to the women he hurt" (Frederick). Díaz asks the same of the *Oscar Wao* reader: that they accept Oscar's toxicity towards women without question, and that the novel's abused women fade into

the background as nothing more than window-dressing or instruments to enable the male protagonist's growth. The colonial lens that Díaz invites through the text's final lines only further troubles the problems inherent in this setup, as it aligns Oscar with a history of colonization and violence against women.

In light of my conclusions of the troubling use of colonial literature and the implications of that use in gender and sexual relations in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I must address Junot Díaz's recent sexual harassment and abuse allegations. Díaz held a place in the literary landscape as a celebrated and honored author of color, as evidenced by his reception of the MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant" in 2012, position as a professor at MIT, and position as chair of the Pulitzer Prize committee for fiction (a role he stepped down from in wake of the allegations). In late April, Díaz published a bracingly raw account in *The New Yorker* describing his childhood rape, and dealing with "the idea… that trauma replicates itself, that victims become perpetrators," albeit in a way that many have seen as "completist in its scope and ambition… [but also] structured to keep your focus away from the other injured parties [i.e., women]" (Loofbourow). Then, in late spring/early summer 2018, multiple female authors, most of whom met Díaz in workshops or through other literary circles, stepped forward and accused him of misogynistic behavior at the least and active sexual harassment and assault at the worst. Author Zinzi Clemmons began the conversation about Díaz in the height of the #MeToo movement, tweeting on May 4, 2018, that "As a grad student, I invited Junot Diaz to speak to a workshop on issues of representation in literature. I was an unknown wide-eyed 26 yo, and he used it as an opportunity to corner and forcibly kiss me" (@zinziclemmons). Others soon posted their own experiences. While MIT (after launching an investigation into his conduct) and *The*

Boston Globe have kept Díaz on staff, this is not enough for some: three poetry editors at *The Boston Globe* resigned in protest after hearing of his absolution. Díaz himself issued an apology in the wake of the accusations—one that, however, he later rescinded.

Of course one must be careful when noting similarities between author and character, as "there are limits to what Díaz's litany of his characters' manipulative behaviors can tell us," but the fact remains that literary legacies of colonization, toxic masculinity and violence towards women affect more than just fiction (Loofbourow). Díaz was, and despite the tarnishing of his reputation, to some degree still is a literary darling. For years, critics read Díaz's novels as they read Oscar, or even as some read Yunior: as ameliorative masculinity, as "offer[ing]… a far more nuanced and democratic…vision of manhood"—and disregarded some of the text's toxic elements in favor of this positive reading of a complex and troubled work (Weese 102). In wake of these allegations, many readers have returned to *Oscar Wao* and Díaz's other works with new eyes, seeing in them a critique of masculinity that may be present, but certainly does not go far enough, as, to reiterate Frederick, it invites the reader to "read and empathize with the abuser… with little thought to the women he hurt." In doing so, Díaz himself and his actions serve as a prime example of the modern, real-world consequences of colonial masculine traditions, and furthermore of the women who suffer from them.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, despite its author's stated intention of telling a story about learning the errors of one's patterns, ascribes to a deeply troubling colonial script, passed down through a century of literature—a script that repeatedly devalues and violates women and uses them as props in men's journeys of self-actualization. And while we do not live in *Oscar Wao's* occasionally fantastic, often brutal world, this legacy of imperial brutality

remains a modern curse—a self-perpetuating fukú that affects our most gifted writers and our most thoughtful academics. The consistent prioritizing of male self-actualization at the expense of female victims of male violence, the consistent excusing of male figures who, like Oscar, are "not as bad" in comparison with other men—these are modern society's colonial legacies, its references back to imperial narratives like *Heart of Darkness.* We must transform these habits of reading and excusing if society is to move into a truly postcolonial state beyond the imperial script. This is something with which Díaz would perhaps agree. In a 2012 interview, he said that he had learned that "sometimes you've got to become the person you need to become before writing the book you want to write… The desire and the talent are not always enough, sometimes you have to change as a human being… [In writing *Oscar Wao*] I did change. But I fear not enough" (Tillotson). Like Díaz, our reading habits have not changed enough in the years since Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness,* or indeed in the years since Díaz wrote *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.* We must continue to examine the texts in our canon, however new or old, and continue to trace the hegemonic masculinity and imperialism that rear their heads in modern fiction. Furthermore, we must interrogate the ways in which authors deploy colonial literature and the colonial past in their works, as referencing these works brings a multitude of complex connotations about the colonizer and the colonized. Ultimately, reading *Oscar Wao* in conjunction with *Heart of Darkness* allows us to reconsider masculinity and violence against women in Díaz's novel, and furthermore to reconsider the ways in which we read male characters and male authors. This reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* forces the reader to grapple with the "horrible" implications of Oscar's "Wondrous Life"—namely, the violence wrought upon women by male colonizing figures throughout the text. In short, it

prompts us to consider the manifestations of this imperial, sexual violence in our fiction if we are ever to move into a truly postcolonial state in our reality.

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