



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

The House that Diaspora Built: Enacted Environments in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar*

Wao (2007)

Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) tells the story of Oscar de León and his Dominican American family, weaving together the experiences of several generations and reflections on Dominican history to illustrate the reverberations of Trujillo's dictatorial violence. The story opens with a narrator (who we later find out is Yunior, one of Oscar's friends) describing a "curse" that was brought with Columbus during his first encounter with the New World. This curse, known as fukú, has traveled both through time and geographical space, and can only be counteracted by a benevolent force known as zafa. Yunior describes the novel as a "zafa of sorts" that will serve as an antidote to the havoc and suffering caused by the curse. The subsequent narrative details Oscar's transformation from a "normal" Dominican boy to an overweight, social outcast who loves comic books and science fiction. Interspersed throughout the text, flashbacks and footnotes reveal how Oscar's family history is marked by the brutality of the Trujillato. When an ill-fated relationship goes wrong, Belí, Oscar's mother, is forced to flee the Dominican Republic and settle in



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

New York. Years later, Oscar returns to the island and finds himself in circumstances eerily similar to those that preceded his mother's departure in the 1960s. However, instead of returning to the United States, Oscar chooses to stay and accept the consequences that await him.

Since its publication, *Oscar Wao* has been the subject of numerous academic and critical studies. To date, these studies have primarily focused on genre (both the incorporation of various genres in the narrative as well as how to categorize the novel itself), how Díaz's writing engages with the tradition of Latin American magical realism, and aspects of diasporic Dominican identity such as gender and race. The purpose of this essay will be to shift the focus of analysis from the identity formation of individual subjects within the context of the Dominican diaspora to the spaces inhabited by these subjects. I argue that the enacted environment in both Santo Domingo and New York as well as their respective peripheries, Baní and Paterson, reflect the influence of forced migrants and diasporic subjects. By examining infrastructure projects, remittances, and flows of capital as they are portrayed in the novel, we can deepen our understanding of the uneven development and complex



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

relationships that characterize post-diasporic spaces in both the Dominican Republic and the United States.

To highlight how this argument breaks from previous academic discussion, it is first necessary to review some of the scholarly perspectives about *Oscar Wao* that have emerged over the last decade. The importance of genre as it pertains to the diasporic experience has been explored by critics such as Monica Hanna, Tim Lanzendörfer, Diane Pifano, and Elena Sáez, among others. Hanna contends that through its incorporation of multiple genres such as magical realism, comics, and science fiction, Díaz “develops a historiography that shifts the narrative structure as well as the subject of history, allowing for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant, elements” (500). For Lanzendörfer, a knowledge of the intertextual references to fantasy fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings* is crucial for understanding Díaz’s historical (127), while Pifano claims that the fantastic elements in the story serve to “mediate the cultural discrepancies underlying this multifarious narrative...which result from the incomprehensible violence of the Trujillo regime and the Dominican diaspora in the United States” (no page). Sáez calls the novel a “foundational fiction for the Dominican American diaspora” (523) and posits that



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

“rather than recording the origins of a nation, the novel recounts the pressures that shape the historiography of a diasporic community” (552). Structurally, the inclusion of footnotes, epigraphs, and multiple narrators in *Oscar Wao* facilitate the telling of a history as complex and traumatic as that of Trujillo’s dictatorship and its aftermath.

Critics have also commented on the link between authority and authorship as well as the novel’s self-conscious references to “páginas en blanco”. According to Kelly Adams, diasporic Dominican American writers such as Díaz perform the task of “releasing the dead from silence” in what she calls “literary truth commissions, which, like their political and officially sanctioned counterparts, bear witness to atrocities to promote and engender sustainable forms of democracy” (26). Juanita Heredia argues that the novel not only contests Trujillo’s authoritarian rule, but also United States imperialism and globalization through Díaz’s engagement of “the cultural archive of African racial discourse” (208). Race as it pertains to Dominican identity, both on the island and in the U.S., is a theme throughout *Oscar Wao*. There are numerous descriptions of skin color and disparaging remarks about blackness made by characters, who often equate darker pigmentation with undesirability. In her study, Virginia Arreola posits that “Dominican diaspora authors grapple with the question of what



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

happens when a central part of people’s lived experience and embodiment,” such as blackness, “is suppressed by hegemonic national discourses” (323). Embodiment is also a concern of Rocío Carrasco Carrasco and Cinta Mesa González, who “consider diaspora as a process of changing that affects the human body” (57). In various ways, these scholars all address how migration and external conditions affect the formation of individual subjects.

However, very few studies to date specifically highlight the importance of the urban and built environments in the novel. Two exceptions include Stacey Balkan and Carmen Méndez García. Focusing on the portrayal of the Dominican Republic, Balkan juxtaposes Baní with Santo Domingo and considers Baní to be a “specific incarnation of the McOndo aesthetic” while Santo Domingo is a site where Trujillo constructs his version of the Latin American “lettered city” (no page).¹ On the other hand, Méndez García notes the significance of the U.S. city of Paterson, New Jersey in the novel due to the large number of Dominican-Americans that reside there, as well as its connection

¹ Originally intended as a play on Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s village of Macondo, Alberto Fuguet defines McOndo as “no more and no less than a sensibility, a certain way of looking at life, or, better yet, of understanding Latin America (make that America, for it is clear that the United States is getting more Latin American every day)...McOndo is a global, mixed, diverse, urban, 21st-century Latin America, bursting on TV and apparent in music, art, fashion, film, and journalism, hectic and unmanageable. Latin America is quite literary, yes, almost a work of fiction, but it's not a folk tale. It is a volatile place where the 19th century mingles with the 21st” (69).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

with other cities on the East coast such as the Bronx in New York, Perth Amboy in New Jersey, and Lawrence, Massachusetts that have large Dominican diasporic communities (268). However, my analysis centers on Díaz's portrayal of urban development in New York and Santo Domingo (both in relation to one another as well as in relations to their respective peripheries, Paterson and Baní) to demonstrate the impact of the Dominican diaspora on the built and enacted environments.² Additionally, this analysis considers the consequences of displacement and migrations as broader phenomena within the Dominican Republic and the United States.

In his discussion of place-making practices by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles, James Rojas affirms that, "The identity of the place is created through the culturally related behavior patterns of the residents. It is not built; it is enacted." (42). While the "built" environment refers to how space is constructed via architectural practices, the "enacted" environment is created by the people who move

² Some scholars debate whether Dominican immigrants should be viewed as a diasporic community or as transnational subjects. Writing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Silvio Torres-Saillant argues that diaspora best characterizes this experience because it suggests both "taking root and...becoming uprooted" (31). Other critics, such as Jorge Duany, consider the Dominican Republic to be "a transnational nation-state" (185).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

through and use those spaces.³ By examining the descriptions of physical buildings and infrastructure as well as tracing the movements of the characters Belí, Oscar, and La Inca in Díaz's novel, the reader can gain a deeper understanding of the influence of the Dominican diaspora on both the built and the enacted environments.⁴ First, I explore Belí's relocation from the Dominican Republic to New York within the broader historical context of Dominican/U.S. relations and immigration. Next, I demonstrate how the enacted environment of Paterson, New Jersey facilitates the formation of a community that extends beyond the diaspora to encompass other immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. Finally, I consider the movement of Oscar's grandmother, La Inca, from Baní to Santo Domingo and the effect of remittances and foreign capital on the city.

³ In his study of East Los Angeles, Rojas conceives of the "enacted environment" as the way that people behave in and move through the open spaces between architectural, or built, elements. The enacted environment also includes the objects that people use to modify structures (22-3).

⁴ In the sense that Rojas's formulation of the "enacted environment" is the product of a confluence of factors such as how people move through and use a space, this term is similar to Doreen Massey's definition of the "spatial," which is "constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations" (4). However, the "spatial" is more expansive in that it encompasses "the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace" (Massey 4). In contrast, the "enacted environment" is the result of how people conduct their daily lives in the spaces between architectural elements in a given location such as a city or neighborhood.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

By the early twentieth century, economic ties between New York and Santo Domingo had expanded due to the growing importance of the sugar trade (Derby 17). Commerce flowed between the two cities as sugar was exported to New York and other goods were then shipped back to the Dominican Republic for sale (Hoffnung-Garskof 4). In addition to the material exchanges between the two cities, the image of U.S. prosperity perpetuated by imperialist interventions in the D.R. enticed some Dominicans to migrate to the United States. From 1961, the year of Trujillo's death, until 1965, the U.S. granted more than 10,000 visas to Dominicans per year, which exceeded the amount granted during the entire decade of the 1950s (Hoffnung-Garskof 68-9). While some of the newcomers were explicitly political exiles, the majority migrated to the United States seeking economic opportunities (Hoffnung-Garskof 79-81). Though Belí's escape from the D.R. was precipitated by political violence during the Trujillo regime, the dictator's death creates the opening that she needs to leave the country. The narrator tells us that "papers were assembled, palms were greased, and permissions secured...La Inca gave Beli photos and letters from the woman she'd be staying with in a place called El Bronx" (162). In this way, Belí is a part of the wave of Dominicans that entered the United States in the early 1960s. However, her character defies a neat



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

categorization of political exile. Though her social transgression incurred the wrath of those in power, Belí is not politically active in the Dominican Republic, nor does she develop a political consciousness once in the United States.⁵ Even before fleeing becomes necessary to ensure her physical safety, she dreams about building houses in Havana and Miami (126). Furthermore, unlike many Dominican migrants that came to the U.S. hoping to make money and then return to their homeland, Belí never expresses the desire to go back and reside in the D.R. Her migration journey is set in motion by state violence, but she does not choose to return, even after the danger has passed. Consequently, Belí is a political exile that also embraces the economic possibilities of migration.

Obviously, the hope of achieving prosperity in the United States was not unique to Dominicans but shaped the experience of immigrants from a variety of nations. In this sense, Belí's living conditions were most likely similar to those of other recent arrivals to the United States. In the novel, her first years are described as the time

⁵ In this sense, Belí's character falls outside of Duany's theorizations about transnationalism. Duany's analysis focuses on Washington Heights as a center of political and cultural engagement that relies on continued exchange between New York City and the Dominican Republic, thereby exemplifying transnational bonds. However, Belí's political apathy towards events in the DR and her lack of desire to return to her home country demonstrate how she resists forming a part of a transnational community.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

“when she was freezing in basement apartments in the Bronx and working her fingers to the bone” (137). Later, the narrator poses the rhetorical question, “Oh, Belí...what did you know about states or diasporas? What did you know about Nueva Yol or unheated ‘old law’ tenements...?” (160).⁶ Belí’s initial dwellings were cold, poorly ventilated apartments that did not align with the image of New York as a bastion of economic prosperity and progress. Díaz’s descriptions of these places contain sufficient details to convey the hardships that Belí endured when she reached the United States, but their lack of specificity allows her experiences to be viewed as a part of a larger immigration narrative that extends beyond the Dominican diaspora. While moving to New York City from the D.R. was seen as one way to improve socioeconomic status, the difficulties that Belí encountered there compelled her to make another move, this time out of the city and into the suburbs. Given the timeline in the novel, by the 1990s Belí had not only been able to purchase a home for herself and her two children, but she also had become a landlord. She rented out a portion of her house to Peruvian boarders that she “allowed...to pack as many relatives as they wanted into the first floors” (267). In

⁶ “Old law” tenements were built between 1879 and 1901. These buildings had less stringent requirements for air shafts and interior light than those built after 1901, when the Tenement House Act of 1879 was modified (Oser, no page).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

this way, Beli's story comes full circle: she starts out her migratory journey as a boarder with a woman in the Bronx, eventually moves to Paterson where she purchases a house, and then proceeds to rent out spaces in her home to other recent Latinx immigrants.

Just as descriptions of the built environment in the novel reveal challenges that Belí was forced to negotiate within New York City, the way that Díaz portrays Paterson, New Jersey demonstrates how the characters engage in place-making practices.⁷ For example, the *barrio* is a touchstone for community belonging in both the Dominican Republic and the United States. During a visit to his grandmother in Baní, Oscar would “sit out in front of the house with his abuela and watch the street scene, listen to the raucous exchanges between the neighbors” (31). Though physical dwellings comprise the space, the people that occupy the neighborhood enact their environment through their interactions. However, these place-making practices shift in Paterson. Instead of the direct contact between neighbors that occurs in Baní, the exchanges between Oscar's

⁷ Here, I use the term “place-making” to describe how the characters' interactions create a feeling of community. My notion of “place” closely aligns with what Rojas describes as a “sense of place,” which is produced by a combination of architecture and human interactions (14). However, it is important to note that conceptions of “place” can be problematic. As Massey points out, “All attempts...to establish boundaries, to secure the identity of places, can...be seen as attempts to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time” (5). In this way, “place” can become an essentializing construct that discounts the porousness of households, cities, nations, etc.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

family and their neighbors are characterized by observation and not interaction. When Lola walks with her goth friend Karen on Main Street where the de León house is located, she observes that “we were being stared at by everybody” (58) and Oscar frequently watches his childhood crush, Maritza Chacón because his bedroom window looked directly at the front of her house (18). The street becomes a place of surveillance that is defined by watching and being watched.

Though the neighborhood streets of Paterson are not used to create community in the same way as they are in Baní, the expressway facilitates connection between Dominicans living in the greater New York area. Curiously, the construction of highways in places like Los Angeles often had the opposite effect on Latinx communities. Raúl Villa notes the divisive effects of infrastructure projects on the Mexican and Mexican American community as the construction of highways resulted in the displacement of families and the fracturing of existing neighborhoods (111-155). However, in *Oscar Wao*, major arteries like the New Jersey turnpike and Rt. 18 literally and figuratively bring characters together. As a result, Paterson is a component of a greater Dominican community that encompasses parts of New York and New Jersey. This sense of community also included other Spanish speaking migrants from the



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Caribbean. Early in the novel, Yunió describes how growing up in this region affected Oscar:

Paterson, however, was girls the way NYC was girls, Paterson was girls the way Santo Domingo was girls. Paterson had mad girls, and if that wasn't guapas enough for you, well...then roll south and there'd be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City, West New York, Weehawken, Perth Amboy — an urban swath known ...as Negropolis One. So in effect he saw girls — Hispanophone Caribbean girls — everywhere. (25-26)

Given the ease of travel and exchange between these various cities, the greater New York area, its suburbs, and the smaller cities within its proximity are viewed as an extension of both the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean as a whole.

Movement through this region heightens the physical and emotional bonds that form between the individuals in the novel. Oscar meets a girl named Ana Obregón in his SAT prep class and begins to court her. Their first non-class outing is to the Amboy Multiplex. On the way home, Oscar “watched the Hess Building and the rest of Woodbridge slide past through a snarl of overpasses” (39) as they travel toward the Elizabeth exit. Later, they visit the Yaohan Mall located in Edgewater, New Jersey (41).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Both the Amboy Multiplex and the Yaohan Mall are accessible via I-95, another major route that connects large swaths of the greater New York area. Later in the novel, Rt. 18 serves to unify much of the student body at Rutgers where Oscar, Lola, and Yunion are undergraduates. The ability of individual bodies to circulate through this area solidifies the sense of connection among the Dominican community. Consequently, information travels from city to city as well. For instance, when Lola is assaulted by a neighbor during her childhood, the incident “was common knowledge throughout the family (and by extension a sizeable section of Paterson, Union City, and Teaneck)” (25). Thus, the sharing of information produces a type of extended family network that is strengthened by the capacity to travel throughout the region.

While Belí’s trajectory from New York City to Paterson represents socioeconomic progress in the United States, La Inca’s relocation to Santo Domingo from Baní indicates upward mobility in the Dominican Republic. This projection of New York and Santo Domingo as modern metropolises offering opportunities for advancement can be attributed to the prevalence of the discourse of *progreso* within the Dominican American community. In the study, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950*, Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof defines *progreso* as “an idea of historical change: over time,



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

things get better” (11). According to Hoffnung-Garskof, “Building a concrete house to replace a shanty, moving from the countryside to the city, moving to New York...are all kinds of *progreso*” (11). The peripheric relationship between Santo Domingo and other places in the D.R. has often been shaped by economic conditions that favor the capital as a locus of wealth. One of the earliest examples of migration from the countryside to the urban center occurred in 1606 when Spanish authorities torched northern settlements in an effort to crack down on a contraband economy between freed slaves that had emerged in the rural areas. The intended result of this destruction was to force settlers to move closer to Santo Domingo where they could be more easily regulated (Derby 13). However, until the 1880s, when rail lines were built to link the Cibao plains with the northern shipping town of Puerto Plata, there was very little national infrastructure and even these railways did not connect Santo Domingo to other economic centers (Derby 14-15). Only in the 1930s, during Trujillo’s rule, did the Dominican Republic began to transform from a “rural nation to an urban society” (Hoffnung-Garskof, 1). Though the story of Oscar’s family is not told in chronological order, some of the earliest descriptions of the D.R. and Santo Domingo appear in the



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

chapters that take place during the years of 1955-1962 when the country was still undergoing this transformation.

According to the narrator, at that time Belí lived in Baní, “a city famed for its resistance to blackness...on one of the main streets, near the central plaza” (78). Baní is portrayed as a provincial city that clings to both the racist social vestiges and architectural legacies (i.e. the central plaza) of colonialism. During this same time period, the cities are described as not having yet

metastasized into kaiju, menacing one another with smoking, teeming tendrils of shanties; in those days their limits were a Corbusian dream; the urban dropped off, as precipitous as a beat, one second you were deep in the twentieth century (well, the twentieth century of the Third World) and the next you’d find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane. (146)

The reference to the urban architecture of Le Corbusier evokes images of order and progress, of neat rows of buildings made of concrete and glass. Yet this urban dream abruptly ends at the edge of the city limits. Not only does this spatial transition represent a shift from the developed to the agrarian, it also represents a movement back in time, from the modern to the primitive.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Trujillo's successor, Joaquín Balaguer, continued to push the narrative of modernization and "its many projects for clearing and developing the barrios usually brought promises for new housing, paved streets, or other local development" (Hoffnung-Garskof, 53). However, by the late 1970s, economic and political turmoil in the Dominican Republic led to delays in infrastructure projects such as road building (Hoffnung-Garskof, 56). In the face of these unfulfilled promises, Dominicans still managed to generate financing for their families to experience types of *progreso* such as moving from the countryside to Santo Domingo. In *Oscar Wao*, La Inca is able to move her bakery business from Baní to the capital as well as buy a house in Mirador Norte (274-5), an upper middle-class zone of the city. The narrator calls this house the "house that Diaspora had built" because Oscar's mom "had bought their house with double shifts at her two jobs" (279). In the book, *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA*, Sarah Lynn Lopez discusses the impact that remittances sent by Mexicans working in the United States have had on housing and architectural practices in Jalisco, Mexico leading to more Americanized dwellings and neighborhood configurations (35-70). In a similar way, Beli's remittances to her mother enable La Inca to move to a community such as Mirador Norte, where the houses have lawns and are



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

constructed on cul-de-sacs (281). According to Hoffnung-Garskof, “In 1999, remittances sent home by Dominicans working abroad amounted to \$1.75 billion, 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product” (6) and Maja Horn also notes that, “The growth of the Dominican economy in recent decades has been based mainly on the tourism industry, remittances, and the output of free trade zones” (4). Remittances sent to family members in the D.R. provide the resources not only for necessities, but also for home construction, business expansion, and greater educational opportunities.

Other residents of Mirador Norte also used foreign capital to finance their lifestyles. Ybón, the prostitute that Oscar falls in love with, is La Inca’s neighbor. Ybón “lived two houses over and, like the de Leóns, was a newcomer to Mirador Norte. (Oscar’s moms had bought their house with double shifts at her two jobs. Ybón bought hers with double shifts too, but in a window in Amsterdam)” (279). During their conversations, Ybón reveals that she spent time earning money as a prostitute in Italy, Portugal, and Spain as well (286). Furthermore, the development of Mirador Norte is associated with American influence. Ybón is contrasted with the majority of La Inca’s other neighbors who have a “Nuevo Mundo wannabe American look” (280). Ybón’s sex work abroad not only finances the construction of her home, but also subsidizes



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

infrastructure improvements in the Dominican Republic. Yunior relates that his friend Jahyra in Villa Juana, who is also a prostitute, “lived in Curazao, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Rome...who claimed, proudly, that her aparato had paved half the streets in her mother’s hometown” (285). Given the failure of Balaguer’s government to deliver on development projects, remittances and money earned abroad by Dominicans resulted in direct investments in infrastructure improvements.

While Yunior declares that “Paterson was girls the way Santo Domingo was girls” (25), this statement minimizes the role of foreign capital that enters the D.R. through prostitution. Throughout the entirety of *Oscar Wao*, Santo Domingo is associated with the illicit sex trade much more explicitly than any of its U.S. counterparts. Alluding to this industry, during the 1950s Santo Domingo is described “Then, like now, Santo Domingo was to popóla what Switzerland was to chocolate” (121). Similarly, while Lola is attending high school on the island in the 1980s she notes, “One thing you can count on in Santo Domingo. Not the lights, not the law. Sex” (206). This theme is once again repeated in the description of the summertime Santo Domingo that greets Oscar in the early 1990s, “it’s...one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Canadian, American, German, and Italian tourists love to rape” (273). The implication of including these details throughout various decades is that while the other economic developments such as fast-food restaurants and conspicuous consumption are complexly intertwined with the diaspora, the flourishing sex industry was present prior to the nation’s urban industrialization efforts and maintained a constant influence over the course of time.

By events that take place during the 1990s in *Oscar Wao*, the impact of the diaspora can clearly be seen in the descriptions of Santo Domingo. When Oscar and his family return for a summer visit (presumably in 1994 if we trace the timeline offered in the novel), the narrator describes how, “Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year’s cadenas and paquetes...” (271). Not only are those who left during the diaspora returning to visit their friends and family, but through their clothing and the gifts that they have purchased, they perpetuate the idea that they have acquired wealth abroad. Upon his arrival to Santo Domingo, Oscar observes the city and notes:



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

...the general ruination of so many of the buildings as if Santo Domingo was the place that crumbled crippled concrete shells came to die—and the hunger on some of the kids’ faces, can’t forget that—but also it seemed in many places like a whole new country was materializing atop the ruins of the old one: there were now better roads and nicer vehicles and brand new luxury air-conditioned buses plying the longer routes to the Cibao and beyond and U.S. fast-food restaurants (Dunkin’ Donuts and Burger King) and local ones whose names and logos he did not recognize (Pollos Victorina and El Provocón No. 4) and traffic lights everywhere that nobody seemed to heed. (273-275)

Many of the buildings, perhaps the same ones alluded previously as a part of the “Corbusian dream” that characterized the urban centers during the 1950s, were in a state of disrepair by Oscar’s visit in the 1990s. However, the materialization of “a whole new country”, is associated with the improvement of infrastructure, comforts such as air conditioning, and a wider variety of fast-food choices, all of which portray Santo Domingo as a globalized phoenix rising from the ashes of its past.

Yet alongside all these markers of *progreso*, Oscar also witnessed “mind-boggling poverty” (277) as he traveled through the Santo Domingo of the 1990s. His



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

grandmother's house in the capital may have had a TV and air-conditioning, but as Hoffnung-Garskof notes, "Only the relatively well-off in Santo Domingo could afford Internet cafes, cable television, sport utility vehicles, cellular phones, food courts, and replicas of suburban midwestern steakhouses" (9). So, while there were new tunnels throughout the city with corresponding signs banning donkey carts (277) that symbolized the Dominican Republic's transition from agriculturally dependent pre-industrial society to a modern center of industrial commerce, there were also still marginalized populations such as beggars and Haitians that were not reaping the same economic benefits. Modernity's uneven arrival within the D.R. indicates the limitations of remittances and the investment of foreign capital to uniformly improve living conditions throughout the island in the absence of a political commitment to do so.

In previous examinations of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the Dominican diaspora has been discussed at the level of individual identity, particularly with respect to intersectional considerations such as gender and race. When the spaces within the novel have been considered, it has always been in relation to the impact that these spaces have on the individuals who inhabit them or their connection with national discourses. However, in this essay, I have sought to shift the focus away from how the



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

diasporic subjects portrayed in the novel are influenced by their spaces and instead highlight how these environments are enacted by the way that these characters inhabit them. From the use of existing infrastructure such as expressways in the United States to facilitate the formation of a Dominican community to the creation of infrastructure in Santo Domingo to modernize the city, from the configurations of neighborhoods that become *barrios* to *barrios* that become neighborhoods, and from Dominican houses maintained by remittances to houses in Paterson occupied by fellow immigrants, Junot Díaz's novel demonstrates the complex relationships that have created and defined post-diasporic spaces.

Michelle McGowan

The Pennsylvania State University



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Bibliography

Adams, Kelly. "Democracy, Interrupted: Commissioning the "Truth" in Diasporic Dominican American Literature." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2017, pp. 26-54.

Arreola, Virginia. "Literal Allegories: Queering the Family-Nation in Contemporary Dominican Diaspora Fiction." *Latino Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2019, pp. 323-337.

Balkan, Stacey. "Metropolitan (Im)Migrants in the "Lettered City"." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2012. Online.

Carrasco Carrasco, Rocío and Cinta Mesa González. "The Inscription of Violence on the Culture Body: Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Es: Revista de Filología Inglesa*, vol. 35, 2014, pp. 55-70.

Derby, Lauren. *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Duke University Press, 2009.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, 2008.

Duany, Jorge. *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration Between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Hanna, Monica. "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 498-520.

Heredia, Juanita. "The Dominican Diaspora Strikes Back: Cultural Archive and Race in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Hoffnung-Garskof, Jesse. *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

Horn, Maja. *Masculinity After Trujillo: The Politics of Gender in Dominican Literature*. University of Florida Press, 2014.

Fuguet, Alberto. "Magical Neoliberalism." *Foreign Policy*, no. 125, 2001, pp. 66-73.

Lanzendörfer, Tim. "The Marvelous History of the Dominican Republic in Junot Díaz's



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *Melus*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 127-142.

Lopez, Sarah L. *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Oser, Alan S. "Making Tenements Modern." *New York Times*, 9 Apr 1999, no page.

Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Méndez García, Carmen M. "La huída del Mordor caribeño: El exilio y la diáspora dominicana en *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, de Junot Díaz." *Revista de Filología Románica*, 2012, pp. 265-277.

Pifano, Diana. "Reinterpreting the Diaspora and the Political Violence of the Trujillo Regime: The Fantastic as a Tool for Cultural Mediation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Belphegor*, no. 12-1, 2014. Online.

Rojas, James T. "The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles." *Places*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1993, pp. 42-53.

Sáez, Elena M. "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous*



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Life of Oscar Wao as Foundational Romance. *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2011, pp. 522-555.

Torres-Saillant, Silvio. "Diasporic Disquisitions: Dominicanists, Transnationalism, and the Community." *Dominican Studies Working Papers Series*. CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2000.

Villa, Raúl. *Barrio Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. University of Texas Press, 2001.