

Junot Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
and Its Punishment of Failed Gender Performances

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Dedication

I wish
I could
stretch and scramble
the letters
on my diploma
so it would read
the names
of my
parents and [brother]
like they have always stretched and scrambled
for me.

It will always be
para mi familia.

Gladys A. Perez

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An Introduction to Díaz's Confirmation of Punishment of Failed Gender Performances

On January 20, 2015, *The Guardian* published a poll administered to US critics¹ by BBC Culture; out of 156 novels, Junot Díaz's² *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (*Oscar Wao*) was named the front-runner as the 21st century's best novel so far. While the title suggests that Oscar is the exclusive protagonist, the novel actually provides a detailed look into his sister, Lola, and his mother, Beli as well. Through these characters, Díaz's prized novel captures the sentiment and struggle of Latino Americans, a people group which continues to undergo constant discrimination and marginalization in the United States. Most readers praise the novel for confronting the difficulty of being a foreigner; however, the deficiency in scholarship on the novel's gender dynamics provides a worthwhile opportunity to investigate these issues in the context of *Oscar Wao*'s Dominican culture. A study of Díaz's *Oscar Wao* is necessary because the novel examines the alienation enacted by the dominant ethnic group, and identifies forces that contribute to self-inflicted pain and marginalization within immigrant communities. While *Oscar Wao* is one of many first-generation immigrant narratives, it provides an accessible text that serves as a bridge that outlines the struggle that immigrants experience, and exposes the oppressive dynamics that affect this particular group, struggles inside and out.

Oscar Wao's BBC Culture award also highlights the need to examine this text; the widespread acclaim that the book currently has garnered, beyond America's borders, suggests that it is both read and highly esteemed by many. Besides the novel's prominence and acclaim within contemporary literature, Díaz's intention to enter the current discussion over racial and gender disparity in the United States further justifies a sustained critique of the novel. According to Juanita Heredia, "The fact that Díaz considers Oscar a boy of color suggests that the author

¹ Critics featuring a range from the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Kirkus Reviews*, among other publications

² MIT creative writing professor, *The New Yorker* writer, Pulitzer Prize winner, and writer of critically acclaimed novels (see *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *This Is How You Lose Her*)

wishes to enter a racial discourse in the United States” (209). As a contemporary writer, Díaz has both currency and relevance to explore these issues that current immigrants face. Published only eight years ago, *Oscar Wao*'s timeliness distinguishes the novel from others that have been exploring similar themes in years prior.

Díaz's motivation for writing, according to migration and cultural identity expert Aitor Ibarrola-Armerndariz, is “to rescue-and re-invent imaginatively—those experiences that [immigrant writers] believe are going to help the readers understand their condition in the best possible light” (205). Díaz is one of many immigrant autobiographical writers whose first generation experience is reflected in their works to allow readers to better understand the oppression that many immigrants share. David Cowart, in *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*, highlights these oppressive racisms present in America, as well as in Dominican culture, which typically feature in Díaz's novels:

Díaz scrutinizes the more or less xenophobic—and frequently racist—tendency of a dominant ethnic group to despise and exploit the immigrant, especially if differently colored. Yet he emphasizes the overt racism of Anglos less than the more insidious and destructive racism that is homegrown and often internalized. One need not go to America to learn this kind of racism.... (200)

Because Díaz does not limit the setting of *Oscar Wao* to the Dominican Republic, the setting of the United States further emphasizes the twice-applied racism and marginalization Dominican immigrants: Dominicans are overwhelmed by their own oppressive culture, and they are also alienated upon arriving in America by the cultural majority.

The main alienating force that contemporary immigrants face upon their arrival to America is the language barrier. Díaz's use of Spanish in the novel may be an alienating factor

for an Anglophone audience; however, in his use of Spanish, he narrows the bridge between the dominant American and Latino immigrant cultures by involving both as aliens to each language. Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien states, "Junot Díaz invests language with the power to influence political and social vision ... He makes Spanglish an American language" (22). Thus, not only do Spanish and Spanglish become American, but these languages also ameliorate any strain between the cultures. Díaz's use of Spanglish in the text can arguably be distancing to the non-immigrant reader; in actuality, however, it reflects the predominant language of the modern Latino immigrant in the United States.³ According to Nicolás Kanellos, "The latest waves [of immigrant writers] have coincided with the increased number of Latinos writing in English and graduating from university creative writing programs and thus being fully versed in the American literary canon and decidedly engaged in broadening it" (31). Díaz's biography validates his presence in these newer waves, as he is a first-generation immigrant from the Dominican Republic and was educated in American universities.⁴ Because his language may alienate a reader, in *Oscar Wao*, he defines his Spanish and Spanglish in the footnotes. While some may argue that his use of Spanish estranges a non-Hispanic reader, it nonetheless supports Ch'ien's argument that Spanglish is now an American language. At first, the need to look at the footnotes in order to understand Díaz's text does, in fact, place the non-immigrant reader in the immigrant's place;⁵ however, this is perhaps due to the urgent need to experience what immigrants experience—in turn, the text becomes an agent of bridging understanding about a

³ Because Díaz writes across borders, he employs colloquialisms, Spanish terms, and unusual slang. In some cases, he explains these terms in footnotes, and even gives background and historical precedence to these terms. For the sake of this argument, any colloquialism that requires explanation will also be given a footnote explanation; Spanish terms and slang will also be defined using footnotes. Since Spanish varies across countries, and some terms may be strictly specific to Dominican-Spanish, translations are provided in the footnotes with proper consideration to both the literal meaning and the connoted meaning.

⁴ Díaz attended Kean College, graduated from Rutgers College, and earned an MFA degree from Cornell University.

⁵ This analogy is based on the fact that immigrants to the United States need to look at a dictionary to communicate and translate words in the foreign language. In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz provides the definitions at the bottom of the page.

people group oppressed both by their own culture and the cultural majority of their new land. Within their respective cultures, immigrants face certain dynamics that suppress them: from racism in their new homes to the gender dynamics exacted by their own, oppressive culture.

Oscar Wao challenges the current anti-immigrant xenophobia present in the United States. Through Díaz's use of Spanglish, and his determination to make Spanglish an American language accessible to an Anglophone reader, the novel subverts contemporary anti-immigrant attitudes. For example, writers like Ann Coulter advocate against accepting Spanglish or other elements of Latino identity as American: "As long as the immigrants were white Europeans, America was allowed to demand that they assimilate, by which it is meant: You adopt our culture. Not: you get to impose your culture on us. But now that our immigrants are overwhelmingly poor brown people, the rules of political correctness require that we submit to their culture" (27). As such a sentiment suggests, the politicizing of anti-immigrant viewpoints serves as a further alienating agent between Americans and one of the fastest growing cultural minorities.⁶ Díaz's text, however, provides a hopeful opportunity to alleviate this tension currently growing in American culture. While critics like Coulter emphasize differences between cultures to further increase the racial and cultural divide, *Oscar Wao*—besides using Spanglish as an American language—also provides uniting themes that can connect readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Danny Mendez, writer of *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature*, adds, "Díaz's characters come from families who are well acquainted with poverty, and they move to the United States carrying with them issues of race, sexuality, and gender that formed part of a complex back in the Dominican Republic and form one in the United States as well" (119). Interacting and empathizing with characters from works like Díaz's

⁶ According to Jens Manuel Krogstad, writing for the *Pew Research Center Fact Tank*, the Hispanic population in the United States will grow to 119 million by 2060 ("With Fewer").

are necessary to bridge a gap between mainstream American culture and those cultures represented in immigrant literature. Language barriers and cultural differences may arise, but common denominators can serve as unifying agents between these two groups.

In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz explores many hardships that immigrants experience. However, the difficulties related to gender among its main characters⁷ lacks extensive scholarship. Thus, the influence and widespread popularity of the novel, as well as Díaz's racial and gender activism legitimize the novel's critical importance, while also necessitating a work that can explain the damaging issues of race and gender identity present in *Oscar Wao*'s Dominican culture. According to Cowart, identity and manhood are often issues within immigrant literature, especially the "powerlessness" that arises from failure to live up to such expectations (195-96). Because Cowart describes the "powerlessness" that arises from identity and manhood, the need to explore how Díaz's novel deals with gender and the powerlessness that gender identity may provide becomes apparent. While critical analysis often considers the role of masculinity in *Oscar Wao*, very little has been said about the novel's depiction of femininity.

The Story

In *Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz exposes gender troubles through the travails of the de León and Cabral family soon after they arrive to America. The novel's structure includes a collection of stories narrated by Yunior⁸ and Lola.⁹ Throughout these short stories, Díaz employs a fragmented, non-linear chronology, with an introduction that explains the idea of a curse that Dominicans are subjected to, and continuing with stories that span three different decades. Ibarrola-Armendariz explains that Díaz's approach is "highly fragmented as it retrieves the sometimes vague and other times deadpan-realistic memories of its protagonist Yunior—Díaz's

⁷ In fact, most scholarship tends to focus on Oscar, while not giving proper time and analysis to Beli and Lola.

⁸ Both a protagonist and the main narrator, Yunior chronicles Oscar's chapters, as well as Beli's chapters.

⁹ In comparison to Yunior, Lola only narrates the two chapters specific to her life story.

second self--, while he also explores the troubled psyches and experiences of his closest kin and friends, most of whom suffer from some form of alienation” (189). The use of memory allows Yunior to introduce Oscar’s youth in the 1970s, and move back in time to provide an in-depth description of Belicia Cabral, Oscar and Lola’s mother. The book’s chronological and narrative fragmentation gives readers comprehensive history of the characters’ origins, their lives, and their ultimate demise. Alongside the non-chronological linearity that Díaz employs, he also constantly foreshadows the characters’ demise.

In the novel, the past exerts a strong influence on the lives of these characters as their lives often feature misfortune and tragedy that arises from their past decisions; the past is also an important feature in the novel’s understanding of gender dynamics. According to Ilan Stavans, in Latino literature, “The past affects everything” (2352); Stavans’ comment is central in understanding the inevitable demise of these characters. Beli, Lola, and Oscar are victims of their past decisions. From the isolation that Lola and Oscar experience, to the eventual demise of all three characters, these characters’ lives are tragic. No matter their decisions or constant battle uphill, they fail to accomplish their life goals while also failing in terms of basic livelihood, acceptance, and peace. Throughout the narrative, these characters often question the cause of their constant misfortune. As a possible explanation for their bad luck and constant difficulties, Díaz introduces the curse that supposedly affects all Dominicans: the *fukú Americanus*, a mystical force from the past, which they blame for their constant misfortune.

FUKÚ

The *fukú*, a curse that Díaz includes into his narrative, is perceived by the characters in the novel as a mystical cause of the misfortunes of the Cabrals and de Leóns. According to Díaz in *Oscar Wao*’s preface, “*Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—[is] generally a curse or

a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (*OW* 1). The *fukú* myth originated after the death of President (or Dictator) Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina.

During his reign, as Díaz reveals in Belicia’s chapter, Dominicans were under constant threat of his oppressive and ruthless dictatorship. As Díaz explains the origins of the *fukú* in the book’s preface, he also provides absurd interpretations of the curse.¹⁰ Clearly, Trujillo’s presidency leaves room for legendary interpretations in the minds of future generations in *Oscar Wao*, but Díaz also suggests that the *fukú* is merely a folktale—in other words, that the curse has no validity in explaining the misfortune of these characters.

Whether Díaz believes in this curse literally or not, his introduction details the widespread belief among his family of the curse’s existence and power; however, the curse is not real. In the novel’s preface, Díaz writes, “But the *fukú* ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” (*OW* 2). Yet Yunior¹¹ attributes it to a phenomenon that is only cultural: “One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he’d heard about his whole life might actually be *true* ... *Fukú* ... He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*” (*OW* 303). Because the *fukú* is a cultural bad luck signifier, it may be merely culture cursing its own people in the novel, and not necessarily a real force that preys upon Dominicans. Further, if the *fukú* is an authentic force that affects the characters’ lives, it requires a more serious cure to prevent it; instead, Díaz reveals that the only way to “counterspell” this curse is merely by saying a word: “...there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and

¹⁰ According to Yunior, “It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond. If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fúa*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, *fúa*, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you, *fúa*, the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow” (3).

¹¹ Yunior is both the narrator and writer of most of the sections in the novel.

your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers) ... Zafa” (*OW* 7). If the fukú is able to exist beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic, and cause such a tragic event as President John F. Kennedy’s assassination (*OW* 3), then it surely would require a prevention method for its victims beyond a simple four-letter word.

Because the *fukú* exists only in the same realm as myths and folktales, it is still not sufficient to explain the constant plight of Díaz’s characters. It seems senseless to allow a mythical belief in a spell to explain how relentlessly Díaz’s characters are punished. Instead of the fukú, there should be a stronger, more concrete explanation for the constant struggle that these characters face.

Clearly, the fukú alone cannot explain the misfortune that befalls Oscar, Lola, and Beli in *Oscar Wao*. If any aspect of the curse is redeemable, it is that Dominicans are, in fact, embroiled in an omnipresent, oppressive system of which they are unaware. As Lauren Derby argues, “the excessive nature of Trujillo’s sexual avarice in terms of both quantity and publicity invoked the ‘hypermasculine pose’” (qtd. in Horn 40). Since the curse does stem from the era of Trujillo, then it also should match the excessive sexual nature, or hypermasculinity that Derby identifies. Taking into consideration Stavans’ hypothesis of the past’s influence on the future, a better explanation would adapt the hypermasculinity of Trujillo’s reign as a symbol of the Dominican patriarchal culture, and take into consideration their failure to live up to Dominican gender expectations. These failed performances, then, result in consequences in the form of punishment for these characters. Because the patriarchal culture has a gender binary that requires strict cultural and gender performances based on gender, males must perform according to this hypermasculinity; any failure to perform to such masculine standards affects these characters.

For women, their failed performances are also worthy of a punishment if they do not perform to what culture expects of them.

Through voluntary choices and involuntary characteristics, these characters can be considered hybrids as they exhibit traits from more than one identity, whether sexual or cultural: Oscar, Lola, and Beli are hybrids because they do not fully conform to the expectations of Dominican culture.¹² According to Gloria Anzaldúa, these hybrids are “formed over time through the interaction of multiple cultures and constantly being transformed by new encounters in the ‘borderlands’ between one culture and another” (Leitch 2097). Thus, the *fukú* does not single-handedly result in the characters’ undoing; rather, an additional cause is their irreducible hybridity in a culture that does not accept hybrids.

Anzaldúan Hybridity

Cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa presents her hypothesis of a hybrid identity in her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and focuses on hybridity within the bounds of Latino-American literature. In this work, Anzaldúa identifies the various borders that exist in people of Latino descent, and argues that a single identity does not allow a person to flourish; rather, she urges the need for a *mestiza* identity to arise. A *mestiza*, or a woman of mixed race, should be “un amasamiento,”¹³ (102), which requires “a new value system with images and symbols that connect [two identities] to each other” (103). This definition of the new *mestiza* explains Oscar and Lola’s predicament as first generation immigrants, and Beli’s as well; as hybrids, they depart from fulfilling various gender roles that they must traditionally perform as a male and female characters within a strict patriarchal culture.

¹² In their respective chapters, these characters will be examined in how some areas of their lives represent this hybridity; while they may hold Dominican and American passports, their hybridity is also part in other areas of their life, from their physical attributes, to their intellectualism and how they relate to other Dominicans.

¹³ Spanish for a mixed product, or an amalgam

While Anzaldúa's work focuses on the Mexican-American society, it mirrors what *Oscar Wao* attempts as well, and is nonetheless important in providing a framework that considers some aspects of these characters as hybrids. Anzaldúa's work as a cultural theorist and activist is widely respected, and reflects her identity as an immigrant and as a woman marginalized by her Mexican and Mexican-American cultures: "Anzaldúa's work is important—and has been widely read and taught—not only because she effectively articulates the radical understandings and aspirations of the ethnic, feminist, and gay liberation movements born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but also because she faced the ambivalences and contradictions of these movements" (Leitch 2095). This thesis relies on Anzaldúa as an authority figure and cultural theorist that is not only a champion for immigrant, racial, and gender issues, but also one that has lived and experienced the harsh reality of a patriarchal society, much like the characters in *Oscar Wao*.

While Anzaldúa's work exclusively details cultural hybridity, in Dominican culture, most cultural performances are equivalent to gender performances; thus, a character being culturally hybrid performs actions that are also gender-constituted. These characters' hybridity is a necessary component for immigrants to exist in a quickly diversifying world, providing the explanation for *Oscar Wao*'s characters as hybrids. Unfortunately, Díaz reveals that Dominican culture, both during Beli's life and later during Lola and Oscar's, is not yet primed for a mestiza-hybrid that incorporates elements from more than one culture, and instead, forcefully requires the strict gender roles be fulfilled.

Butler's Punishment of Failed Gender Performances

Anzaldúa's criticism on one hand helps explain the role of these characters are hybrids, and also explains how these characters fit within Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as it is also one that argues for the fluidity of identity as it relates to gender. Since these characters can

be seen as hybrids that cannot exist exclusively within their culture, their identity as mestiza-like beings and other failed performances, account for their misfortune and demise. Within her theory of gender performativity, Butler presents an appropriate formula that can provide a framework for understanding the character's failure to fit within the Dominican gender binary. As she argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," "[C]ulture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism" (Butler 412). This component within Butler's gender performativity theory provides a straightforward causal relationship of failed performances that lead to punishment by the character's culture. Thus, Butler's hypothesis in which failed performances are culturally punished can explain Oscar's, Lola's, and Beli's misfortune as a result of their failure of fulfilling gender roles.

As part of her gender performativity theory, Butler contends that gender alone is not a deciding factor in dictating how a male or female should perform; rather, it is culture—a dominant force—that prescribes how a man or woman should both think and act. Butler also argues that culture punishes those who do not perform to its standards ("Performative Acts" 412). Without specifying what culture constitutes,¹⁴ Butler argues that cultural gender standards are those that are obligated by society ("Performative Acts" 412). Butler's theory in which performances are culturally punished,¹⁵ then, dictates that characters will face some form of punishment for their failure to live up to such standards, which reinforces the gender binary,

¹⁴ This thesis assumes that culture refers to the attitudes, customs, and social institutions of a people group, in this argument, of Dominican Republic's culture.

¹⁵ Josef Benson in *Hypermasculinities in the Contemporary Novel: Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin* applies this same framework to describe McCarthy's novel: "Regarding gender performance ... [a]pplying these notions to *Blood Meridian*, one can say that in the same way that gender exists as unstable, so too does the American identity that emerges from its performance ... and yet when we apply Butler's dictum that 'those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished,' we realize that American identity relies on abidance by an unstable law" (6).

which benefits the patriarchy¹⁶ in favoring masculine men and oppressing women. Further, it is important to note that this thesis will not only focus on the Dominican Republic as a patriarchal culture geared towards only undermining women; rather, this culture's emphasis on reinforcing dictated performances for both genders. As a modern feminist, Butler believes gender to be constituted according to performance, and not biologically, which is a more innovative approach to gender than the patriarchal, binary-enforcing Dominican culture.¹⁷ Because most scholarship into *Oscar Wao* focuses on the hypermasculine culture of the Dominican Republic, it is crucial to apply the ideas of an expert that considerably represents the field of feminism and is able to identify the subjugation of both men and women within this system.

Butler's theory is compatible with a text like *Oscar Wao* because she reinforces the current modern thought on understandings of gender based on performance, and also identifies the still-present binary systems that are oppressive—like the Dominican culture within Díaz's novel. Her progressive, contemporary feminist ideals may support current feminist thought, but she also identifies how strict gender-binary cultures impart harmful restrictions to their people. Butler's theory provides this thesis with “[a theorist with] influential critical work on gender, sexuality, and the body” (Samuels 11), as she is a prominent and respected figure in the field of gender studies., Butler's reputation is only part of her affinity to Anzaldúa, as both also share remarkably similar ideas on gender and identity. Both Anzaldúa's and Butler's feminist ideas discard the essentialism of gender, and open “up ‘the field of possibility for gender[;]’ Butler aims for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of desires and selves” (Leitch 2536).

¹⁶ In this thesis, the patriarchy refers to the masculine-favoring Dominican culture that requires people to perform according to what their gender dictates; while most of these performances can be considered cultural, these cultural performances are also gender-specific.

¹⁷ According to Marta Lamas, “Butler defined *gender* as the effect of a set of complementary, regulatory practices that seek to shape human identities into a hegemonic, dualistic model ... she highlights the performativity of *gender*, that is, its capacity to open up to resignifications and personal interventions” (104).

According to Sharon M. Harris and Linda K. Hughes, “Butler challenges feminists to cease reproducing the assumption of just two neatly divided genders, but goes further to challenge the foundationalist assumption that two discrete (biological) sexes underlie the social construction of gender” (271). Because Anzaldúa and Butler share the same ideas of gender construction and oppression, Butler can offer an explanation for how Dominican culture subdues its people in *Oscar Wao*. Oscar, Lola, and Beli have characteristics that are hybrid in nature, and also fail to perform in various other ways; because this hybridity and other failed performances do not conform to strict gender performative standards, Butler’s theory can account for their demise.

While the question for Butler’s incompatibility within a work of immigrant literature may arise, her argument is nonetheless crucial for understanding oppressive patriarchal cultures and the strict gender binary in an immigrant narrative. Butler, while far removed from the borders of the Dominican Republic—far from the fukú’s epicenter—is nonetheless aware of the binary understanding of gender that exists in such patriarchal cultures. Not only does she speak out against patriarchal binaries; she also acknowledges that such cultural gender construction “allows no room for choice, difference or resistance” (Arnold 129), which seem to be the predicament facing Díaz’s characters. Furthermore, according to Myriam J.A. Chancy, “To those who might suggest that it is unacceptable to make use of a white queer theorist to analyze the works of Caribbean women of colour, I would respond that Butler is the major theorist of our time in terms of gender/sexuality constructions” (326). If Butler’s theory in which performances are culturally punished is able to analyze works from women of color, then it is also able to identify the damaging patriarchal system in the Dominican Republic that upholds strict gender requirements.

Butler's theory can examine such foreign works by providing a flexible framework that takes into consideration how culture dictates performances. In "Performative Acts," Butler makes analogy to actors within a play; in this play, the actors must not act all the same, but should act according to "already existing directives" (410). Agreeing with Anzaldúa in the existence of already-established expectations, Butler adds that gender is basically "an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (409), further highlighting that while these characters may have value and uniqueness, they are merely pieces of a puzzle, or moving parts of a system that explain the culture's force in guaranteeing that performance matches a culture's prescriptions. These directives can be referred to as "univocal signifiers, in which gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves as a social policy of gender regulation and control" ("Performative Acts" 412). Despite Butler's departure from essentialist definitions of gender, her argument accurately identifies how cultures actually deal with gender, in this case *Oscar Wao's* Dominican culture. In other words, while her overall argument of gender performativity provides a modern understanding of gender studies, she also identifies the problem with archaic, binary-driven patriarchal cultures. Instead, this culture ensures that the gender standards are reinforced, thus allowing her hypothesis of failed performances as culturally punished to operate. Their failure to fulfill these expectations causes their misfortune and eventual demise, and the fukú becomes merely a proxy for the real explanation behind the tragic events in *Oscar Wao*.

A Caveat About Gender and Culture

While modern Feminism questions gender in terms of biological composition and psychological self-recognition, this thesis takes into consideration the expressed understanding of gender by Dominicans present in the novel, and instead assumes that both gender and

sexuality are determined by biological composition. Though this may seem as a simplification of current feminist thought, it is merely done in order to emphasize the current, yet long-established gender dynamics that Díaz identifies within Dominican culture. In Díaz's world, both within the novel and outside, biology assigns both gender and heterosexuality. This thesis, then, will focus on how the characters within *Oscar Wao* fail to live according to the gender expectations that Dominican culture sets for them, in upholding a binary system of gender expectations according to their biological gender.

Additionally, using Butler's gender performativity theory also does not suggest a full sponsorship of her argument; while Butler's theory provides a progressive, innovative analysis that many feminists hold, it does not offer a conclusive answer to gender identity. Because Butler rejects gender identification within a binary system (Leitch 2537), one should be careful to fully accept Butler's overall claim of gender performativity. For one, these constructive categories can connect a person to his or her culture, and can also provide a concrete understanding of identity where the instability of performativity may disorder or confusion. While in some cases gender performativity can provide a fluidity that does depart from the harmful control of a patriarchal society, the benefits of available cultural gender norms should also be considered. Not all cultures with gender expectations are harmful, unlike the overtly sexual, patriarchal cultures like the one present in Díaz's *Oscar Wao*.

Further, the assumptions of the overtly sexualized Dominican culture depicted by Díaz is not to overgeneralize that culture, but rather to illuminate the flaw within patriarchal cultures with strict gender norms that dictate how their people should perform. While the de León/Cabral family travels between the Dominican Republic and the United States, the patriarchal oppressive

culture follows them, and thus, the same expectations and fulfillment of Dominican gender roles must be met in whichever space they may occupy.

Conclusion

The hardships that Beli, Lola, and Oscar endure are beyond tragic, so “Wondrous” appears a satirical title, even for Oscar’s life. The book provides an interesting though incomplete explanation for the character’s tragedy; however, it is unfair to put forward a mere folktale to explain the constant punishment that these characters experience. These characters are martyrs of an oppressive system that ensures their torment: a patriarchal, and rigid Dominican culture. Instead of a mere curse, Butler’s punishment of failed performances theory provides a more appropriate and comprehensive answer to the plight of these characters. Under her theory, culture dictates certain gender roles, and punishes those who fail to fulfill these roles.

Oscar’s failure to live up to the ideal male standard ensures the brevity of his life, his inability to be sexually and romantically active, his alienation and inability to be recognized as fully Dominican, all of which ultimately lead to his tragic death. Lola’s constant dismissal of her mother and her wishes for independence outside of a subservient female role lead to a final state that contradicts her deepest desires: her confinement as a mother and wife. Finally, Beli’s fatherly role and heroic life story result in a constant tension with her daughter, a tragic outcome for her son, and perhaps even the cancer that ensures her death.

While Butler’s gender performativity theory exists beyond the binary system present in Díaz’s narrative world, it provides a better answer than a mere curse that springs from a dead dictator. Butler’s theory provides a more creditable explanation to address this constant isolation, belittlement and torture: all punishments that arise from the characters’ inability to conform to gender roles.

Chapter One: Oscar Wao: The Demise and Tragedy of the “Protagonist”

Our Hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about--he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero,¹⁸ not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him).

He was seven then.

Introduction

Nicknamed Oscar Wao by Yunió and his friends during their time at Rutgers, Oscar’s character provides the novel with its name, and in comparison to Lola and Beli, undergoes the most tragic demise. Oscar thus serves as a prime example to validate Butler’s theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished. While a Dominican male must meet various standards set forth by his culture, including an attractive physique, an anti-intellectual attitude, and most importantly, successful romantic and sexual encounters with women, Oscar’s character fails to deliver in every aspect. While some of his deviations from the norm are part of the hybridity he must uphold to assimilate in a new land, his failure to perform to the strict standards ensure his punishment. Thus, Oscar validates Butler’s theory by receiving the punishment after willfully and involuntarily overlooking these standards.

The Dominican Male Standard

Butler’s theory regarding the cultural enforcement of gender reveals that Oscar’s inability to perform leads to consequences, from the constant chastisement of his peers, to his inability to find a female companion; however, as impossible as these standards may seem for Oscar to accomplish, they are actually rather basic, uncomplicated criteria. Yunió highlights these

¹⁸ A singer of Bachata music—or one who resembles in the suave, bravado of the Bachata genre.

various requirements in the novel as he describes Oscar, and contrasts him to the way an actual Dominican male should perform.

First and foremost, a true, accepted Dominican male must have attractive physical features. While these features are often outside of the character's control,¹⁹ the culture—or the people, more specifically—take action against others based on these characteristics. For instance, Dominican culture frowns upon overweight males, and is favorable to an athletic mien. This criterion, though superficial, also permits the key characteristic amongst Dominican men: to attract and have heterosexual encounters with the opposite gender.²⁰ In order for a Dominican male to have favor within his culture,²¹ he must have an all-around physique that guarantees, or at least supports, the completion, and constant action, of sexual interactions with women.²² This Dominican drive towards sexual interaction, as Horn argues, stems from the Trujillo reign. She contends that Trujillo's "sexual excess" is one of the dominant remains from his reign (129); because the *fukú* originates from Trujillo's reign, it is his hypermasculinity that remains in explaining the focus on sexuality that men must sustain. Additionally, a true Dominican male must have an only-sexual regard of women. And finally, and perhaps more particular standards that are set forth by Dominican culture are a disregard of intellectualism, as well as the inability to adapt to Dominican culture. Whether the latter means being unable to be recognized as a Dominican male, even as far as feeling alienated in the Dominican Republic, a true Dominican should not feel like an outsider in his homeland.

Oscar's Physical Limitations

¹⁹ For example, hereditary hair features or skin color crucial in Dominican peoples.

²⁰ Fuchs provides various aspects of Oscar's makeup to symbolize his "un-Dominican" identity, and one of them is his weight (53).

²¹ Or live up to the standards of its culture.

²² Díaz describes his creation of Oscar Wao's character as one that differs from the alpha male: "[*Oscar Wao*] was a story about the exact opposite kind of male, where before I had been writing about the male would be considered, in the court of man, one that would be considered a winner, you know: tough, he gets girls, he fucks them, he doesn't really care" (qtd. in Torres 30).

Though seemingly superficial to Díaz's readers who may not perceive physical traits as associated with culture—that is, outside of skin color—Oscar's physical characteristics are the easily identifiable factors that contribute to his inability to adhere to the Dominican standard. Earlier in the novel, Oscar was considered “a ‘normal’ [7 year old] Dominican boy” (*OW* 11); however, this was during a time period in his life when physical features did not necessarily have an impact on his actions or on how others would perceive him. Yet Yuniór narrates, “In later years [. . .] he and Olga had both turned into overweight freaks” (*OW* 15). In light of the expectation that the Dominican male represents the pinnacle of male attractiveness, Oscar does not fulfill this role in his basic appearance as an overweight person. Rather, his weight contributes to his inability to fulfill another key aspect of Dominican male gender roles: ease in engaging in romantic relationships. Simply put, his weight prevents him from finding a girlfriend throughout the entire narrative, consistently ensuring Oscar's displacement into the “friend zone” with all the females he encounters. Because he is overweight, he does not find any fulfilling female companionship. In addition to his weight, which may very well be caused by factors outside of his control,²³ his failure to actively change his physical appearance also contributes to his inability to find a woman, essentially highlighting his unwillingness to fulfill a fundamental cultural gender expectation. In other words, he is not only punished for the excess body weight, but also for his unwillingness to change.

While inaction is a major flaw, his inability to follow through in the few times that he does try to change also leads to his punishment. Yuniór narrates, “He tried a couple times to exercise, leg lifts, sit-ups, walks around the block in the early morning, that sort of thing, but he would notice how everybody else had a girl but him and would despair, plunging right back into eating, *Penthouses*, designing dungeons, and self-pity” (*OW* 25). Oscar's inaction continues later

²³ Whether biological or psychological

into his college years. Yuniior states, “Despite swearing early on to change his nerdy ways, he continued to eat, continued not to exercise” (*OW* 50), revealing Oscar’s awareness of what is necessary to overcome his current inability to find romance and enjoy the carnal pleasures that contemporaries like Yuniior enjoy. Yet, because he does not follow through—knowing that he needs to change—he prolongs his solitude. Using Butler’s failed performances theory, his inaction and unwillingness serve as the cause for this solitude. He fails to work towards the weight loss that will allow him to attract a female companion, and his loneliness is not just a result of being unattractive, but of failing to uphold what is expected of him.

Yuniior’s character, in contrast to Oscar, also highlights Oscar’s complacency and obliviousness to the significant causes of his loneliness. Yuniior, going out of his way to help Oscar, details the few days that this act of charity lasted: “Dude was not into it *at all*. As soon as we were through he’d be back at his desk in no time flat. Almost clinging to it. Tried everything he could to weasel out of runs” (*OW* 177). Surely, Oscar may be afraid of the change, or unable to endure these boot-camp-like sessions with Yuniior. As much as an audience could empathize with poor Oscar, it is clear that he is unwilling to change. While Oscar is a pitiable character, the punishment that arises from his failure to perform still remains. Oscar willingly chooses not to continue with early efforts of working out, and also, opts out of Yuniior’s assistance.

Oscar’s attempted suicide also condemns his inactiveness. Yuniior, speaking about Oscar’s hospital visit soon after his jump “off the New Brunswick train bridge” (*OW* 191), reveals that Oscar had “[w]ish[ed] he’d been born in a different body” (*OW* 190). Without a doubt, this longing arises from his broken body after such a dangerous jump; however, it also reveals a fruitless desire on Oscar’s part for a different, healthier physique. In explaining and realizing that he is not content with his overweight body—Oscar allows an additional

interpretation of his motives that his weight leads to his decision to jump off the bridge.

Eventually, Oscar does achieve a measure of weight loss after his suicide attempt; however, the narrative is ambiguous in regards to whether this achievement was voluntary or involuntary.

After all, it seemed that the weight loss was a result of the needed recovery period and the depression he suffers (*OW* 195). Because he did not lose this weight voluntarily, his culture may not acknowledge his weight loss; after all, he was not in control of it.

After this recovery period, Oscar travels to the Dominican Republic; in this final trip, he encounters Ybón, an aging prostitute with whom he falls in love. Because she belongs to the Capitán, Oscar's oblivious longing for Ybón leads to a brutal assault; in this scene, Yunior calls forth Oscar's appearance. This beating shows that his attackers take pity on him for his unattractive appearance, but it also suggests that this assault would not have occurred had Oscar taken care of his appearance in the past:

Oscar was lucky; if he had looked like my pana, Pedro, the Dominican Superman, or like my boy Benny, who was a model, he probably would have gotten shot right there. But because he was a homely slob, because he really looked like un maldito parigüayo²⁴ who had never had no luck in his life, the capitán took Gollum-pity on him and only punched him a couple of times. (*OW* 296)

In this scene, Oscar's appearance actually plays to his benefit, preventing further physical damage; however, a revisionist approach would reveal that Oscar could have avoided his death and any preceding trauma by merely changing his body image earlier in the novel. The depression he suffers early in the novel is the result of his overweight body that prevents him from having a girlfriend, and it drives him to the Dominican Republic to find companionship

²⁴ Maldito: Damned; Parigüayo: Party Watcher, or a person that watches parties instead of participating in the festivities, an insult to American troops that occupied the Dominican Republic and would watch parties as opposed to participate in dancing.

with the already-claimed stripper.

Oscar within an Anti-Intellectual Culture

In addition to his physical limitations, Oscar's seemingly intellectual and Geek-leaning persona also highlights his inability to perform up to Dominican male ideal. Oscar's preference for Geek culture, however, is part of his identity as a hybrid within a culture that does not accept such characters. His attraction to Geek culture should evoke Díaz's readers a sympathy that other Dominicans do not since Geek culture actually helps Oscar survive his childhood as an immigrant youth in a new land. Thus, Geek culture is not only Oscar embracing part of American culture; instead, Geek culture is actually an agent that allows Oscar to adapt to a new land: "Where this outsized love for genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been . . . of living in the DR for the first couple of years and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both) (*OW* 22-23). This explanation, then, makes Oscar a mestiza who blends his immigrant identity with this newfound Geek culture that provides him with comic books and science fiction entertainment.

However, it is Oscar's continued preference for Geek culture from his youth that actually acts as the harmful catalyst that ensures the cultural punishment. A Dominican man's maturation requires attaining female companionship. However, because Oscar chooses to continue his Geek identity, this choice represents a failed performance in his inadequate preparation into eventually finding a woman. Yunior reveals how his intellectuality and Geek fandom, like his overweight physique, also contribute towards his demise. Earlier in Oscar's life, Yunior reveals Oscar's fascination with *Star Trek*, often considered part of Geek culture. He narrates how Oscar would often play with Maritza, one of his childhood girlfriends: "Oscar liked how quiet she was, how

she let him throw her to the ground and wrestle with her, the interest she showed in his *Star Trek* dolls” (OW 13), which sound like acceptable interests for a child to pursue; however, the designation of “dolls” as opposed to action figures effeminates Oscar to a certain degree, even this early in his childhood. Yuniór does show Oscar’s preference for the girl and the physical attraction between the two, but he also identifies how Oscar’s choice to play with dolls is antithetical to the required masculine standard. Rebecca Fuchs also belittles Oscar’s nerdiness as it causes his alienation, loneliness, and inability to fit with other Dominicans: “Besides being overweight, black, and an un-typical Dominican, he is isolated even more by his nerdiness . . . He is too nerdy to belong to the other immigrant kids, too un-Dominican in his maleness to be a “real” Dominican” (53-54). Though fantasy novels and the sci-fi genre may have helped Oscar endure the hardships of an immigrant childhood in a new country and assimilate to a new land, keeping such childhood attributes present in his teenage and adult years perpetuate his marginalization—a result of a failed performance. Whereas Oscar could be out seeking dates, he prefers to stay at home reading fantasy novels, or writing sci-fi stories.

As Oscar matures and seeks to find a place within his community, he is consequently unable to fit among his neighborhood contemporaries; this alienation is a consequence of his nerdiness and intellectuality. Yuniór writes, “[Oscar c]ouldn’t make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and (if the kids from his neighborhood are to be believed) too *weird* (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before” (OW 17). Apart from the shyness that Oscar exhibits, Yuniór focuses and presents Oscar’s wish to sound smart as a factor that alienates him from seemingly well-integrated Dominican males. For example, Oscar employs a rather elevated word register when describing himself to Yuniór, further alienating him from characters that are instead focused on finding female companionship. Teenage Oscar

uses words such as, “septuagenarian” (*OW* 35), “orchidaceous” (*OW* 35), “*vertiginous*” (*OW* 38), “precipitously” (*OW* 39), “*ubiquitous*” (*OW* 183), “*copacetic*” (*OW* 189). As much as these words may provide an advantage to Oscar in an academic setting, these words and his intellectuality, in comparison to his contemporaries, defy the standard, and results in his social alienation from his Dominican peer group. In describing his type of writing to Ana’s boyfriend Manny, Oscar says, “I’m more into the speculative genres” (*OW* 43), a moment which Yuniior reveals even Oscar “knew how absurd he sounded” (*OW* 43). His longing to sound smart separates him from Manny; this contrast is key in understanding how his Dominican culture dismisses intellectuality. To Oscar’s dismay, Ana prefers Manny, known strictly for his sexual appeal, and disregards Oscar who relies on his “academic,” book knowledge. Such scenes effectively highlight the clear cause and effect relationship between Oscar’s choices and his inability to find a female. In his childhood, these traits prevented a proper foundation for how a male should perform; as a young man, he continues the same intellectual performance that, in comparison to Manny, prevent him from the Dominican goal of being with a woman.

When teenagers his age would begin dating, and engaging in sexual acts, Oscar would do the opposite, greatly defying the standard of achieving sexual activity. Yuniior writes, “His adolescent nerdliness vaporiz[ed] any iota of a chance he had for young love. Everybody else going through the terror and joy of their first crushes, their first dates, their first kisses while Oscar sat in the back of the class, behind his DM’s screen, and watched his adolescence stream by” (*OW* 23). While this alienation due to his nerdiness may have occurred during his childhood, his inability to perform according to cultural expectations in his teenage years further reveals how his intellectualism serves as a primary cause for his punishment.

Oscar’s Family Dynamics

The family unit plays a significant, often-divisive role within Latino cultures, and the same is true in Oscar's family. In explaining Oscar's growth as a marginalized man, Yuniors reveals that Oscar's father left their family soon after they arrived to America. According to Cowart, the theme of fatherlessness is common within immigrant narratives, and it also demonstrates the devastating impact of an individual father's absence:

. . . as Eli Gottlieb observes, "The family portrayed in many of Díaz's stories is fatherless, and the father's ghost-presence is the core of the book, a kind of ground tone or ambient noise which shades the narrator's whole childhood." In other words, the one condition (fatherlessness) compounds the other

(displacement), and in fact the absentee parent recurs in immigrant fiction. (193)

As Cowart reveals, Oscar's family is responsible for Oscar's fatherlessness and displacement—with the father leaving and their arrival to America, respectively. The former, fatherlessness, most importantly highlights Oscar's identity formation without a strong, concrete model for how he should perform as a male. For example, his Tío²⁵ Rudolfo provides an important reminder of Oscar's inability to fulfill this particular role. Earlier in the novel, Rudolfo, in advising Oscar on how to get over an early teenage crush, says, "Listen, palomo^[26] you have to grab a muchacha^[27] y météselo^[28] That will take care of *everything*" (OW 24). Surely, this advice, as blunt as it may be, teaches Oscar what he needs to do in order to get over this girl. This council from his uncle serves as a wake-up call, representing as it does a clear example of Dominican hypermasculinity. However, his uncle's directions also establish an expectation of accountability to which Oscar must answer. Despite this shocking, graphic suggestion to a child who recently broke up with his

²⁵ Uncle

²⁶ Guy

²⁷ Girl

²⁸ Put it in her

elementary school girlfriend, it is still clear that Oscar knows what to do. If his father were present, he would have perhaps offered the same lesson as Rudolfo, though perhaps more authoritatively and effectively than a cocaine-addicted uncle.

However, it is important not to disqualify Rudolfo as a pseudo-role model; while his explicit comment does seem disturbing for a child, the advice is one that Oscar does not listen to, and that he loses his life over: the importance of sexual activity. Ziarkowska adds, “In the case of Oscar’s tío Rudolfo, it is a constant construction of identity on the basis of Dominican racial ideologies and a never clearly defined concept of Dominican masculinity” (143). Even though the role of the father is not clearly defined in the novel, it should guarantee the son’s continuation of male standards. While fatherless, Oscar is nonetheless made aware of how to perform according to his uncle’s instruction; because he does not, it leads to his expected and indefensible demise.

In the absence of Oscar’s father, his mother’s instruction also provides an interesting and disheartening insight into Oscar’s flawed Dominican identity; however, it is his mother’s instructions that also show Oscar’s failure to perform. Because he does not heed to Beli’s instruction, his inaction is a failed performance. Beli, a stereotype of Latina mothers, imposes near-impossible expectations for Oscar. Because of his mother’s influence on his life, Oscar is a hybrid that departs from the typical characterization of the self-sufficient Latino male, as he serves as an obedient yet emasculated son. Early in his life, as Oscar is crying for a girl, his mom suggests that he should physically assault the girl that broke his heart. However, Yunior reveals, “If he’d been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo.^[29] It wasn’t just that he didn’t have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies” (*OW* 15). At such young age, the mother expects Oscar to act in an

²⁹ A slap, or a strike.

aggressive manner that is foreign to Oscar, which could have been familiar to Oscar if his father would have been present. The failure to have a father constantly reinforcing male performances, then, prevents Oscar from learning how a male should perform, further alienating him from the Dominican standard. Instead, he must rely on his mother who reinforces some of the male standards by avoiding this forceful response; however, even in his mother's substitute father role, he fails to perform to her suggestions.

In addition to this absurd expectation of aggression from a child, his mother also holds Oscar to some of the aforementioned standards that do not define a true, Dominican male according to cultural expectation for performance. For example, his mother favors his intellectuality above a choice to be with girls and actually fulfilling the carnal desires of a person his age. Yuniór narrates, "His mother's only comment? You need to worry about your grades" (*OW* 24), seemingly exempting her child from the "true" nature that a Dominican male should possess. Soon after Oscar's suicide attempt, Yuniór narrates the de León's family visit to the hospital: "He saw us and what did the idiot do? He turned his head and cried. / His mother tapped him on his good shoulder. You'll be doing a lot more than crying when I get through with you" (*OW* 191). Instead of providing a warm, affectionate response to his son's life, she seems to further distress Oscar. In doing so, she impairs Oscar who needs to be built up from the rock bottom state he is in. His mother's determination to alternately shelter and constantly beat him down effeminates Oscar as he does not have a male family leader that teaches him strength and dominance over women. Rather, he has a mother family figure that brings him down, questioning and invalidating any power and sign of masculinity he might potentially possess.

After one of his many near-death experiences, Oscar overhears a conversation between his mother and his uncle that jolts Oscar into action, but also illuminates the overtly sheltered

state that she wishes for her son. Yuniór narrates, “The days he lay in bed and thought about his mother fixing him his plate the rest of his life, what he’d heard her say to his tío the other day when she thought he wasn’t around, *I don’t care, I’m happy he’s here*” (269); as much as this may serve to show his mother’s selfish aim towards keeping her son in such an immature, dependent state, it also shows the love that fails to translate to Oscar’s benefit. His mother cares for him, though she lacks the proper decision-making to provide for what her son needs. By siding with her mom, Oscar is the obedient hybrid son, but he is also failing to perform with the self-sufficiency necessary for a male. While his mother may have good intentions, the sheltering of a Dominican male is a destructive decision on her part.

This feminine parenting style in Oscar’s life is also present as La Inca takes care of him during his visit to the Dominican Republic, perhaps having the worst repercussions in Oscar’s life as the location requires Oscar’s masculinity. When he arrives at the Dominican Republic, Oscar’s “family members came looking for him his abuela^[30] chased them off with a single imperial sweep of her hand. Can’t you see the muchacho’s working? What’s he doing? His cousins asked, confused. He’s being a genius is what, La Inca replied haughtily” (*OW* 31). Beli and La Inca both prefer the intellectual route that has been part of Oscar’s formation, but as females, their best intentions turn out to be distressing resolutions for a Dominican male. Thus, this decision-making contributes to Oscar’s effeminate growth.

Although the females may provide the wrong parenting style for a fatherless Dominican male, it is unfair to attribute the entire fault to the females in his family. Oscar is also at fault for relying only on women as he grows up. By accepting La Inca’s determination for him to stay home and not hang out with his friends, Yuniór narrates, “Later when he thought about it he realized that these very cousins could probably have gotten him laid if only he’d bothered to

³⁰ Grandmother

hang out with them” (*OW* 31), proving that his dream of being sexually active could be realized, but he instead chooses to accept his grandmother’s decision. In other words, it is not only the females that give Oscar an unfair development, but it is also his fault for continuing to listen to these women until so late in his life.

Oscar’s Inability to Conform to Others Like Him

In addition to his familial connections, Oscar’s friendships also support Butler’s theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished, as he is unable and unwilling to make changes that would be more fitting of a Dominican male. However, it is almost difficult to pinpoint any significant effects that Oscar’s friendships may have—apart from the women he falls in love with—as he does not have many friends. From the few friendships that he does possess, Butler’s theory can illuminate his inability to fit as a result of his unwillingness to change and conform to the standards his friends uphold.

Al and Miggs are perhaps Oscar’s earliest friends. Deemed “nerdboys” by Yuniór (*OW* 28), these friends mirror Oscar’s hybridity in their fascination with to Geek culture, and fared much like him in regards to their interactions with females—until Al and Miggs finally found two girls to date. As Yuniór reveals, Oscar was hurt by the fact that his friends did not think to include him in their plans, and also found it unbelievable that Miggs, “an even bigger freak than he was” (*OW* 29), was able to find a girlfriend before he could. In his narration, Yuniór implies that these two friends are very much alike, Al being an Indian “prettyboy” (*OW* 28), and Miggs being a “freak” (*OW* 29). While these two boys form somewhat of a physical spectrum, they both are able to find girlfriends; thus, it is not only unattractiveness that prevents Oscar to find a girlfriend. The difference between Oscar and his friends is Oscar’s Dominican nationality, which causes Oscar to be the only one of the group without a female companion. Yuniór adds, “He

realized his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*” (*OW* 29), which sounds rather absurd, considering the similar preference for Geek culture on the part of all three individuals. This friendship with Al and Miggs shows an absolute contrast of how a Dominican culture undermines Oscar’s attainment of a girl due to his inability to fulfill his expectation of having a girlfriend.

Later in his life, Oscar loses the *faux* friendships of Al and Miggs—in fact, his life seems absent of any friendships. After his arrival at Rutgers, “and after a couple semesters without any friends but his sister, he joined the university’s resident Geek organization, RU gamers, which met in the classrooms beneath Frelinghuysen and boasted an entirely male membership” (*OW* 50). While Yuniór’s narration does not cover these first semesters, Oscar’s inability to develop a friendship appears almost ordinary, as Yuniór understates the importance and impact of a couple semesters without friendships. As Yuniór also states, “[Oscar] had thought college would be better, as far as girls were concerned, but those first years it wasn’t” (*OW* 50), he continues to highlight that Oscar’s inability to find a friend is linked with his inability to find a woman. While Yuniór expands on Oscar’s romantic affairs later in the novel, it is clear that up to this point in Oscar’s life, there is a concealed, yet powerful force that continually impacts and punishes Oscar’s inability to make friends. Because the *fukú* is unable to clearly explain this inability to attain friends, Butler’s theory exposes the consequences of Oscar’s action and inaction. Because Oscar does not seem to seek to actively avoid such lonesomeness—by adapting to Dominican male standards—he is allowing culture to punish him for his inactivity.

Is Oscar Dominican?

While his dual citizenship could be interpreted as his hybridity, Oscar also faces a rather alienating and destructive experience as he encounters other Dominicans both in the Dominican

Republic, and in America. While his birth certificate may suggest that he is Dominican, he is not recognized as Dominican by others, a more significant measure of identification than that found on a mere passport. Earlier in the novel, his afro-hairstyle causes his barber to question his descent: “Wait a minute ... *You’re Dominican?*” (*OW* 30). Later in the novel, Yunior himself further question’s Oscar’s Dominican identity: “To say I’d never met in my life a Dominican like him would be to put it mildly” (*OW* 171). In other words, even people who are close acquaintances to Oscar have trouble in finding what makes Oscar Dominican. This afro-hairstyle is one that potentially establishes his hybridity as the hairstyle suggests a possible Haitian or African descent; however, even his hairstyle, a factor that he is almost unable to control,³¹ contributes to his alienation. His inability to have a more Dominican-seeming haircut, a performance of sorts, causes suspicion towards his Dominican identity on the part of other Dominicans.

Oscar’s unidentifiable Dominican identity continues in his homeland—not only is Oscar disregarded as a compatriot, but also he is unable to identify with the problems in his country. A true Dominican should not feel like an outsider in his homeland. However, during a conversation with one of his cousins in the Dominican Republic, Oscar writes in his journal, “I’m in Heaven,” to which Yunior narrates, “Heaven? His cousin Pedro Pablo sucked his teeth with exaggerated disdain. *Esto aquí es un maldito infierno*”³² (*OW* 275). Even his optimistic presence and return to the Dominican Republic reveal that Oscar is detached from a true perception of the hardships of life in the Dominican Republic. Oscar’s stubbornness, and constant detachment from the lived experience of Dominican culture continue throughout the novel: “he refused to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not*

³¹ While he could style it differently, his hair would always possess the same color, texture, and un-styled look appearance.

³² This right here is a damned or fucking hell.

belong, after he'd gone to about fifty clubs and because he couldn't dance salsa, merengue, or bachata..." (OW 276). Despite Oscar's presence in the Dominican Republic for such a long time, it is not enough for him to regain his Dominican citizenship because of others' perception of him. More specifically, the alienation that he suffers in this scene is also due to his inability to learn to dance, a rather achievable goal that would have prevented his lonesomeness. However, his early fascination to Geek culture explaining what choices contributes to Oscar's alienation to his culture. Joanna Ziarkowska points to Oscar's choices in the past to explain why he is perceived as he is in the Dominican Republic and in America: "Oscar does not blend in with the Dominican surroundings. No matter how hard Oscar tries to sound and look Dominican, he is always perceived and treated as a tourist" (OW 145). In all, a young Oscar, who opted in favor of Geek culture but opposed to losing weight, could have potentially avoided this alienation. It is not Oscar's doing that causes this future punishment at the hands of his inability to fulfill gender roles; rather, it is his inaction from actively seeking to fulfill these roles that play towards the alienation he experiences and the loss of his Dominican identity by the Dominican culture he seeks.

Oscar's Inability to Fulfill Sexual Gender Roles

As sexuality is a huge part of Dominican culture, where a man must engage in carnal activity, Oscar's lack of sexual encounters contribute to his punishment. Oscar's unattractiveness is only the beginning of his problems. He does not just allow Oscar to appear as an emasculated being, but his unattractiveness also affects his relationships, both with strangers and potential lovers. While this may seem a rather universal theme, the need to find companionship is heightened within Dominican culture due to the implied hypersexuality. Oscar is not only unable to find a woman; he does not even make the effort to increase his likelihood of completing this

goal. However, Oscar did start in a promising way, worthy of a Dominican man. As Yuniór reveals, his childhood “was truly a Golden Age for Oscar, one that reached its apotheosis in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only *ménage à trois*” (*OW* 13), a statement which offers a grim look into the necessary machismo even at such early age. Unfortunately, Oscar’s turn to the Geek culture and dismissal of any efforts to better his physical appearance—as discussed earlier—do not allow his character to keep up with the relationships that could have flourished earlier in his life.

Yuniór constantly identifies Oscar’s obsessive nature towards women, yet also highlights his fruitless attempt at finding a girlfriend; Oscar has the desire, but cannot actually fulfill what culture requires of him. Because Yuniór represents the Alpha male in the novel, at least in his Dominican male’s easy ability to find sexual partners, his surprise and astonishment at Oscar’s interest in women is noteworthy: “I mean, shit, 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” (*OW* 174). Despite Oscar’s interest, however, Yuniór also notes Oscar’s inability to make good on his carnal desire.

While sexual aspiration forms one part of the Dominican requirement, the fulfillment of these impulses is also necessary. As the novel continues, Yuniór reveals that Oscar cannot even begin a conversation with a girl. Yuniór narrates, “Homes had it *bad*; couldn’t so much as see a cute girl without breaking into shakes. Developed crushes out of nothing—must have had at least two dozen high-level ones that first semester alone. Not that any of these shits ever came to anything” (*OW* 174). While Oscar does possess the intense, ardent lust for women, whether romantic or sexually, his inability to realize these urges contribute to his punishment. He is unable to perform up to the expected carnal desires, and then he is punished for this shortcoming.

Additionally, Oscar's romantic side conflicts with the Dominican male psyche because he clearly focuses on the romantic aspect of relationships, while abstaining or placing little to no importance on the sexual. More specifically, Oscar's chivalrous consideration of women differs vastly from how males approach females in this culture. Fuchs writes, "Using vernacular phrases such as 'pulling in the bitches' demonstrates the absurdity of Dominican *machismo*: Women are merely 'bitches' to be hunted down like 'game'" (53). However, Oscar is the opposite of what Fuchs deems standard expressions of Dominican *machismo*. After seeing Jeni Muñoz, otherwise referred to as La Jablesse, Oscar "looked down at his hands. I think I may be in love" (*OW* 183); upon seeing the same girl, Yuniór's response differed vastly in his refusal to use such romantic language, instead, focusing on La Jablesse's body. While Oscar's gallantry may be a touching feature, it is also one foreign to Dominican males, which unequivocally, Oscar fails to resemble.

Oscar's almost feminine romantic feelings may very well be determined by his father's absence and his mother's constant and influential presence. Oscar becomes a tender and thoughtful character, a caring *mestiza* that possesses a respectful demeanor towards women. However, these same positive qualities are ones that effeminate him in comparison to the typical Dominican macho ideal. According to Yuniór's narration, upon seeing Oscar frequent Ybón's company, "His abuela steady gave him shit, told him that not even God loves a puta.^[33] Yeah, his tío laughed, but everybody knows that God *loves* a puto^[34]" (*OW* 286); this exchange clearly shows the family structure hypermasculinity that Oscar does not meet. In other words, Yuniór reveals the culture's favorability of men over women, but also highlights the obvious preference for a hypermasculine man over one that does not live up to the culture's masculine standards. Sandín writes, "That Díaz sacrifices Oscar demonstrates that in his work thus far the macho

³³ Bitch in Spanish

³⁴ Male version of Bitch in Spanish

always wins. Oscar is chivalrous, tender, and tenacious in the face of his family's opposition to his pursuit of Y[b]ón. In the end Oscar's behavior looks like foolish idealism" (123). Thus, this "idealism" perceived as positive is actually the opposite of the masculinity that Oscar should and must exhibit in order to fulfill the expectations for his gender. Oscar's inability to fulfill these roles while still coming up short only seeks to further underscore the importance of Butler's performativity theory. Despite being portrayed in a positive light by the author in his treatment of women, because he does not fulfill this machismo expected of him, Oscar is given the solitude and constantly effeminate treatment by his peers. Sandín continues, "In Díaz's work there is such a strong conflict between the macho badass and his opposite, the sensitive macho, that a doubling relationship or a triad of characters always reflects this conflict... In the end, the badass macho posture wins the day even for Díaz" (116). In the novel, Yuniór, the ambassador for the macho Dominican male enjoys a more favorable outcome.

Because of all of Oscar's shortcomings, Oscar does acknowledge that he is an outlier within his community, and longs for sexual relationships, though he continues to approach women with an attitude that inevitably prevents his success. According to Yuniór, Oscar says, "I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin" (*OW* 174). Yuniór later mentions that he received Oscar's letter that reveals that Oscar did succeed in dying a Dominican male who is not a virgin. Despite this success in the last pages of the novel, Oscar is further emasculated. Yuniór continues, "Turns out that towards the end of those twenty-seven days the palomo³⁵ *did* get Ybón away from La Capital . . . Ybón actually *kissed* him . . . Ybón actually *fucked* him" (*OW* 335). In revealing the sexual activity that Oscar achieves, it seems that Ybón has the dominant role in the sexual act that occurred because she is the one controlling the

³⁵ Colloquial for guy or young man, even friend

action, while Oscar is merely a recipient of this intimacy. While Oscar eventually does fulfill this life-long goal, he still manages to find himself in a position of effeminacy.

Oscar's Tragic Death

Ultimately, his death arrives as the most forceful punishment in the novel. After seeking Ybón's attention and affection, despite the Capitán's warnings and consequences, Oscar is once again taken to a rural location in the Dominican Republic, where he is fatally shot by one of the Capitán's men. His death is not necessarily a response to his decision to seek after a woman who is already linked to a powerful man; rather, his death comes, as Butler's theory reveals, for his inability to fulfill gender prescriptions throughout his whole life.

Yunior later in the novel reveals that Oscar's only motivation for embarking on a final trip to the Dominican Republic is to clear his head; upon meeting this woman, and once again falling in love with another woman as has been his habit, his stubborn yet foolish decision leads him back to the Dominican Republic as he believes that Ybón represents the last hope for him to attain affection. As mentioned, loneliness and alienation cause Oscar to fly to the Dominican Republic, and get involved with Ybón; however, his trip to Santo Domingo may have been prevented had he performed according to his culture's standards for a man. The Capitán and his men are only partially responsible for Oscar's death; rather, it is Oscar's inability to fulfill these roles throughout his life that causes his death.

Earlier in the novel, Yunior's omniscient narration provides a clear foreshadowing of this death, attributing the possible death to Oscar's physical appearance and solitude that arises from his inability to fit in. Yunior narrates, "He walked into school every day like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was, and all he could think about was the day of his manumission, when he would at last be set free from its unending horror" (*OW* 19). While Yunior's narration in this excerpt could

only explain Oscar's longing to quit school, it also leaves the interpretation of Oscar's longing to depart from the life that is plagued by his "fat" and "lonely" existence. Revealed just a few pages into the story, it seems as if Oscar is aware of the changes necessary to prevent his death, much like he is aware that his other characteristics would prevent him from his constant isolation and loneliness. His nerdi-ness and physical appearance are factors that Oscar could have changed; instead, his inactivity seems to almost welcome the death he later faces. In other words, because Oscar is unwilling to change his physical features and personality to match those of his contemporaries, he is also in control of the death that such inaction promises. Yuniór's narration also reveals that Oscar, in a way, commands the Capitán's man to fire. When asked about what "fuego" means in Spanish, Oscar yells, "fire," and is shot by the men (*OW* 322). The translation that Oscar provides is not only a correct answer to these men, but it is also an order he Oscar that he yells out, effectively suggesting that he always had a measure of control. In this last scene, it is Oscar that gives the orders for his execution.

Ultimately, his presence in the Dominican Republic heightens the impact of his death; because he is at the place of origin for such expectations, his stubborn unwillingness to assimilate to the macho culture becomes clearer and clearer. In America, Oscar is punished because he diverges from Dominican male expectations. However, in the birthplace of such expectations, the punishment appears much harsher. This relationship with the call girl might have served as a mere wake-up call to encourage him to achieve the Dominican masculine standard and continue having relationships, though Oscar does not heed to such call. Instead, he persists in his old qualities and remains almost the same. Because such sexuality and need to exhibit manliness are cultural traits expected of Dominican men, his refusal to give in to such expectations inevitably leads to his death.

Conclusion

In the novel's narration, Oscar's character is unable to fit in to the Latino culture due to his refusal to entertain the physical and emotional requirements already in place, which in turn, lead to immensely tragic consequences. Oscar is an intellectual being, and treats women with respect in a universally accepted way. From physical attributes that he does not actively seek to change, to his personality and interests that contribute to his hybridity, Oscar cannot live up to these strict gender requirements. As the protagonist and tragic hero of the novel, Oscar operates on various levels in accordance with Butler's argument of the punishment that arises for those who do not perform to the strict expectations dictated by culture. Not only does culture subject Oscar to a tragic, final punishment by his horrific death, but it also ensures punishment and unfair treatment throughout Oscar's life.

Chapter Two: Lola's Free Spirited Youth into Future Domestic Confinement

“That’s life for you. All the happiness you gather to yourself, it will sweep away like it’s nothing. If you ask me I don’t think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That’s enough.”

Lola

Introduction

During the Q&A portion part of his “*This Is How You Lose Her*” lecture” at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, Junot Díaz revealed that his third book (*TIHYLH*) almost focused solely on Lola de Leon, Oscar’s sister. Lola’s presence in *Oscar Wao*, however, is dwarfed by the stories of Beli and Oscar. Despite Lola’s minor presence in the novel, her character confirms Butler’s theory due to the hardships and eventual demise that arise after her inability to fulfill gender expectations within this Dominican culture. Her inability to perform to these standards results in her constant inability to fit in with her contemporaries, and in her eventual, seemingly-positive demise.

Throughout the narrative, Lola does not conform to many of the ideals that her culture dictates for a woman, thus illuminating her presence as a hybrid character. Instead, she departs from the standards that her culture has dictated for her. Being a free spirit, Lola’s independence does not conform to the dependency—either to family or a man—expected of her. According to cultural standards, Lola should be the obedient daughter that endures her mother’s mistreatment; yet, she does not fulfill this expectation as she is constantly dismissing her mother’s pleas. In doing so, her behavior against her mother contributes in part to her alienation and constant misery due to her inability to fulfill this gender role. Additionally, she is unable to fully

comprehend her role as a woman, either sexually or romantically, and further, constantly contradicts the expectations that her culture sets forth. However, as much as Butler's theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished serves to explain how her choices have allowed for the punishment she soon endures, it also shows the unfair and often-contradictory nature of what is expected of a woman within this culture. Her constant dismissal of Dominican gender stereotypes inspires the punishment that she constantly endures; while she lives a free-spirited lifestyle in her younger years, the novel ends with her confinement within a family, contrary to the lifestyle that Lola expected and longed for.

The Dominican Daughter Standard

Establishing the ideal Dominican standard is critical in illustrating how a daughter should perform in contrast to how Lola actually performs. It is this deviation that serves as the cause for the punishment that Butler's theory supports. However, identifying a female Dominican standard is complicated due to the often-conflicting characteristics, and the almost-impossible task of fulfilling all expectations that the culture dictates. In *Oscar Wao*, these complex and confusing expectations prevent Lola from truly living up to what is expected from a standard Dominican woman. These expectations clash with Lola's character, complicating of how to truly perform as a Dominican young woman. Her inability that arises from this complexity contributes to her constant misfortune, validating Butler's argument.

A Dominican daughter must live up to almost-unachievable standards as part of a patriarchal system.³⁶ Because she is the daughter, she will always come second to her male counterpart. First and foremost, Lola reveals “[w]hat it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave” (*OW* 56), showing how

³⁶ According to Chancy, Dominican women are subject to this patriarchal system: “As the novels of Julia Alvarez reveal, women’s roles in the Dominican Republic are explicitly tied to compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal norms” (238).

Díaz aims to establish as the foundation for how Lola should perform. A true Dominican daughter must also be perfectly obedient to her parents.³⁷ This obedience includes, but is not limited to, “cooking, cleaning, doing the wash, buying groceries, writing letters to the bank to explain why a house payment was going to be late, translating. I had the best grades in my class ... I stayed at home and made sure Oscar was fed and that everything ran right while she was at work. I raised him and I raised me” (*OW* 57). Clearly, the family structure of a missing father wreaks havoc on expectations and family dynamics. However, while it is the father that is absent, the responsibility rests on Lola. This unfair burden of responsibility highlights the second-class citizen status of a female daughter within a Dominican family.

In terms of sexuality, especially as an unmarried woman—at least for the majority of the novel—her character also endures two opposing forces: purity versus carnality. As Fuchs argues, for men, “Women are merely ‘bitches’ to be hunted down like ‘game’” (53), which reinforces Chancy’s argument of patriarchal Caribbean cultures: “Women’s bodies—and by extension their inner worlds—have been reduced to commodities” (251). However, as much as Dominican men should be seeking and engaging in sexual acts with women, Dominican women have a requirement to be sexually pure. In addition to chastity, there is also a cultural force that, as Fuchs reveals, considers women as ‘bitches,’ or carnal beings capable or expected to fulfill men’s sexual desires. These two forces contradict one another, and in Lola’s case, cause unhappiness and her loss of virginity earlier in her teenage years. These two options may only provide two polarized choices for how a Dominican woman should approach sexuality, but Lola lives both sides of the spectrum at different times in her life; this differentiation feeds the fluid hybridity in Anzaldúa’s theory, and flexibility in gender performance that Butler argues.

Along with these conflicting expectations for Dominican female sexuality, the mother-

³⁷ Though in the novel, Lola and Oscar’s father is absent, thus, the obedience is towards Belicia

daughter relationship is also important to analyze. Beli requires Lola to stay home because a chaste Dominican daughter is safest when housebound. As Lola discloses, “For a couple of days the house was a war zone, and then on Friday she let me out of my room and I was allowed to sit next to her on the sofa and watch novelas with her” (*OW* 63). While all these forces cause a certain commotion in Lola’s decision-making—clearly providing confusion and instability in her decision-making—the ultimate requirement for a Dominican daughter is absolute obedience to her mother. In a conversation with her mother, Beli claims, “You’re my hija,^[38] ... that’s what you’re supposed to be doing” (*OW* 57). While they may not have the perfect mother-daughter relationship, Beli’s strictness serves as the matriarchal model that dictates how a Dominican daughter should perform. Any infringement against the norm triggers the punishment carried out by the Dominican culture.

Modern Patriarchy and Rape Culture

Lola’s character strongly defies the Dominican standard of a woman being a delicate, lady-like, yet sexual being. This deviation allows her the mestiza identity that enables her to have a mannish persona at times while being a female; however, it also contributes to her constant alienation and demise, and highlights the unfairness of Dominican culture’s expectations for women. Because Lola is not ladylike, the Dominican patriarchal system orders the punishment without paying any regard to the causes for her failure to live up to such expectations. Under *Oscar Wao*’s Dominican culture, Díaz demonstrates that women simply cannot win.

In other words, the rigid patriarchal system does not show compassion or consider the meaning behind Lola’s mestiza roughness; instead, it punishes without regard for the circumstances that contribute to Lola’s persona. For example, Lola’s physical features and personality follow Stavans’ principle of “The past affect[ing] everything” (2352), as the past

³⁸ Daughter

that regularly determines Lola's choices. Yuniór narrates, "When she was in fourth grade, she'd been attacked by an older acquaintance . . . and surviving that urikán^[39] of pain, judgment, and bochinche^[40] had made her tougher than adamantine" (*OW* 25), and indicates how Lola had consequently changed throughout her teenage years: "she'd turned into one of those tough Jersey Dominicanas, a long distance-runner who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you without a speck of vergüenza^[41]" (*OW* 25). Yuniór reveals this causal relationship that highlights how Lola's physical changes are a graver offense than the actual sexual assault. However, her adaptation of a defensive personality is hybrid in nature, as she departs from innocence into self-preservation, a defense mechanism that seeks to protect against the repetition of this attack. This passage emphasizes the culture's role in favoring one sex over the other, further revealing that this system unjustly punishes the female victim instead of the male attacker.

The same characteristics that give a Dominican woman her worth—physical beauty—are the very ones are subverted within this patriarchal system. Continuing his explanation for Lola's hair style change, Yuniór adds, "Recently, she'd cut her hair short . . . partially I think because when she'd been little her family had let it grow down past her ass, a source of pride, something I'm sure her attacker noticed and admired" (*OW* 25), showing that her pride as a Dominican, which should be respected, or at least be considered a physical trait that adds to her worth as a woman, is instead another factor that contributes to the sexual assault she experienced as a young girl. Therefore, fulfilling the physical beauty standards increases the possibility of such tragic acts.

Further, this same atrocious sexual encounter provides Lola with a certain unfeminine

³⁹ Hurricane in Dominican-American Spanglish

⁴⁰ Gossip

⁴¹ Embarrassment

demeanor and rawness that makes problematic future encounters with men. After she runs away to Jersey Shore, she encountered some boys that flirted with her, who suggested that she wear a bikini; Lola responded: “Why, so you can rape me? Jesus Christ, one of them said, jumping to his feet, what the hell is wrong with you?” (*OW* 65). This encounter suggests that Lola reacts nonchalantly and even detached from the reality of the opposite sex’s admiration of her figure, but it also highlights the fact that rape fails to be acknowledged within the culture as a grave, destructive event that harms Lola in a way that prevents her desire to fulfill any of these gender expectations. Lola should be proud of her beauty, but her physique actually acts as a catalyst for the internal turmoil as she considers her body as a feature that could increase the likelihood of being raped again. Lola, the clear victim of the sexual assault, is constantly punished despite her inability to control the event.

Finally, the relationship with her mother, in regards to this past tragic event, also maintains the novel’s depreciation of a patriarchal system. Instead of being someone to lean on for strength, dependence, and support, her mom is merely another force that acts against her. As Lola reveals, “When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn’t have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name” (*OW* 57). Instead of helping each other overcome the patriarchal oppression faced by both characters, this system even turns women against each other, intensifying the unfair condition for women within this culture.

Lola’s Physical Limitations

Physical beauty is a crucial aspect of a Dominican woman’s formative years. Most importantly, and widely held by various cultures, is the belief that a woman finds her worth in

her physical features. In *Oscar Wao*, this notion is also present. In Lola's character, yet also serves to show that her physical attractiveness—despite her late-blossoming beauty—also acts against her, and in turn, guarantees a certain punishment. This punishment comes in the form of alienation from most Dominican women, but she is also further marginalized due to her skin color.

The relationship between Beli and Lola adds a complication to the already complex system that Lola must submit to in order to guarantee her livelihood and peace. As much as she may want to be beautiful and appeal to men during her teenage years, Lola must submit to her mother's insults and accept, as her mother describes, that she is ugly. If she were to challenge her mother, by owing to this attractiveness, or rather realizing and acting on her beauty, she would defy her mother. Instead, after years of this misery, Lola accepts that "Fea's^[42] become [her] new name. Nothing new, really" (*OW* 54). Thus, by dismissing her own physical beauty and submitting to her mother's opinion of her, she accepts the misery that accompanies her obedience.

Her skin color is another physical trait outside of her control, which also contributes to her ruin. Lola describes herself in her first chapter, highlighting the dark skin tone that she shares with her mother: "*You have her complexion too, which means you are dark*" (*OW* 52); even this trait that she inherits from her mother facilitates the constant punishment she receives. According to Ziarkowska, "During her brief stay at one of the more prestigious schools, in which whiteness is a synonym for attractiveness and social privilege, Beli stands out as the racial Other" (142). Díaz writes, "my mother using the word prieta^[43] as a synonym for ugly and blanca^[44] as a

⁴² Ugly has

⁴³ Black female

⁴⁴ White female

synonym for beautiful, even though none of her children were blanco^[45]” (“Author’s Commentary” 67). Her skin color, factor outside of her control, limits the appreciation of her beauty under a Dominican system that objects to a darker complexion. Mendez adds, “According to numerous studies pertaining to racial constructions in the Dominican Republic, the overriding cultural imperative has been to mask blackness at any cost” (132). Time and again, readers see factors that Lola is unable to control, which unfortunately nonetheless guarantee the punishment she will experience due to Butler’s theory of the punishment of failed performances, but which also, demonstrate how the system will always act against a female.

Lola’s Alienation

In addition to her physical features, Lola’s alienation also dictates her inability to fit with her contemporaries; that is, she cannot associate well with others in her neighborhood, friends, or acquaintances. According to Ziarkowska, “[Lola] defines herself by defying stereotypes and challenging assumed norms as to what constitutes Dominican female identity. Unfazed by accusations of lesbianism, Lola shaves her long black hair, which for Beli is a marker of her daughter’s Dominicanness” (144). Though Ziarkowska’s statement only mentions the physical, it is clear that Lola is willing to confuse others’ perception of her sexuality in order to defy their understanding. However, it is this same mestiza-like defiance that contributes to her punishment by the Dominican patriarchy. Because she willingly seeks to set herself apart as a hybrid, uniqueness is merely a part of what she accomplishes.

Instead, by shaving her head, she is guaranteeing the punishment that arrives from failing to fulfill her culture’s gender standard of beauty, which arrives in the form of the constant ridicule that Lola experiences. For example, this physical change and psychological attitude lead to insulting reactions from the people in her neighborhood: “The puertorican kids on the block

⁴⁵ White male

couldn't stop laughing when they saw my hair, they called me Blacula, and the morenos, they didn't know what to say: they just called me devil-bitch. Yo, devil-bitch, yo, yo! My tía Rubelka thought it was some kind of mental illness. Hija she said while frying pastelitos, maybe you need *help*" (OW 54). Any aspiration towards self-expression and individuality, while authorized by Anzaldúan hybridity, is seen by her culture's stricter embrace of rigid gender binaries as negative, and further points to Lola's inability to conform to the Dominican identity. More importantly, though, this self-expression enacted through wearing different clothes actually causes some to mistake her individuality for a mental illness. Her mother, on the other hand, reacts by questioning her sexuality: "everybody, including [her] mother, was convinced she'd turned into a lesbian" (OW 37), which occurs during the time when most girls her age are in the streets looking for a boyfriend.

Besides her sexuality, Lola's defensive demeanor is one that alienates her from most girls her age. According to Ober, "Those [Caribbean women] gentle birth and breeding are sweet, and flower-like, with a bright alertness peculiar to the Latin woman transplanted in American soil and climate" (qtd. in Okihiro 30). However, Lola differs from this expectation with an alertness that is more defensive and combative than expected. Yuniór's narration reveals: "If a boy hit *me*, Lola said cockily, I would bite his *face*" (OW 18). While a younger Lola may not have been this prepared to defend herself against an opponent, it is perhaps the tragic act of being sexually abused which causes Lola to grow into the woman that she is, prepared to defend herself at all costs. Not only is this attitude of self-preservation one that alienates her from most other "warm and delicate" women, but it also makes Lola guilty of a crime that she is not responsible for. Because she wants to avoid at all costs any possibility of future violence against her, she is alienated for wanting to protect herself, which highlights that any efforts towards

safety are neutralized by this dominant patriarchal system. While Lola's departure from mainstream Dominican gender roles may be supported by Anzaldúa's hybridity, her failure to fulfill the standard alienates her from more traditional adherents of the gender binary.

Lola's Independence

In terms of her aspirations for independence, Lola also deviates from what a standard Dominican woman would prefer. This deviation fulfills her presence as a hybrid character by her refusal of this particular standard. Traditionally, a Dominican woman does not seek independence outside of a family, and also, does not pursue travel on her own. Instead, a Dominican woman should aspire towards becoming educated, at least until she marries. While her education may lead towards the possibility of eventual independence, being rooted in a fixed family structure is preferred. Lola writes, "I was fourteen and desperate for my own patch of world that had nothing to do with [her mom]. I wanted the life that I used to see when I watched *Big Blue Marble* as a kid, the life that drove me to make pen pals and to take atlases home from school" (*OW* 55). In retrospect, Lola understands these childhood dreams to be wishful thinking. She writes, "I really believed it would happen too. That's how deluded I was by then" (*OW* 68), acknowledging the absurdity much later.

Her dreams of independence, though valid, are absurd for a Dominican woman. According to Diana Bellesi in *Voice-Overs: Translation and Latin American Literature*, "[A patriarchal] construction left the female enclosed in the limits of the domestic sphere as her only space of production, often exercising only the reproductive function that social structures demanded, and as a function of the object of the lone subject: the masculine subject" (27). Such an ideology clearly suggests how Lola should perform: within the limits of the domestic sphere, as a reproductive being, subservient to a male partner.

However, Lola consistently defies this norm in a rather complex way, and this emancipation is one that her culture is not willing to accept from a young woman. Wanting to emancipate herself from her mother's grasp, she dreamed of disappearing, "And one day [she] did" (*OW* 61). This drive towards autonomy, however, paradoxically resulted in her actually fulfilling the Dominican standard of reliance on a male partner, despite it being the opposite of what she had dreamed (*OW* 61). As much as running away helps her fulfill her wishes for both autonomy and male companionship, they nonetheless defy the fundamental requirement of obedience towards her mother. In short, by fulfilling one aspect of the Dominican standard, she fails another very important one, thus resulting in punishment. While in the Dominican Republic, she again wished to run away; however, it seems that running away is merely an action that is only acceptable for men.⁴⁶ She writes, "Like my father disappeared on my mother and was never seen again. Disappeared like everything disappears ... But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in" (*OW* 208). Through this statement, she realizes that in clear contrast to men, she has a responsibility to obey her mother. However, by stating that her father also ran away, she acknowledges that the liberating act of running away, a symbol for independence, is exclusively permitted to the men.

Dominican culture, at least in terms of what Díaz offers in the text, is highly sexualized, and thus, requires difficult expectations for a girl like Lola, especially in terms of dependence on men. On one hand, part of the culture requires her to please men, especially in her need to possess an attractive physique, but her familial expectations also require her to be chaste. Thus, either path that Lola takes will, inevitably, result in punishment. Relating the time she lost her virginity, Lola writes, "the whole time I just said, Oh yes, Aldo, yes, because that was what I imagined you were supposed to say while you were losing your 'virginity' to some boy you

⁴⁶ For example, their father runs away, along with various male figures within the novel.

thought you loved” (64); however, this “thought” is expressed with regret. As she later reveals, “I started to think that maybe it was like in the books; as soon as I lost my virginity I lost my power” (*OW* 65). Because she is conflicted as to how she should approach sex, she does not fully comprehend what she should do. If she engages in sexual interaction, she loses her power as a woman, but if she stops this sexual interaction, she no longer exudes the sexuality that a Dominican woman must possess, revealing the once again conflicting, damaging outcomes for Dominican women.

Ultimately, she seems to opt for the highly-sexualized path; in prostituting herself to her classmate’s father, she adds, “My toto^[47] good for something after all” (*OW* 210), which is only a carnal consideration of her person. Whether losing her virginity to the boy she loves, or asking for money in exchange for intercourse, she loses cultural currency and power as a woman. Either decision conflicts with the other, and each choice definitively contributes to her demise.

Lola’s Mother

Much like it was for her brother, Oscar, the family unit is also one of the most destructive, and in Lola’s case, unalterable structures pitted against the healthy growth of her character. While it does serve to provide Lola with an idea of how a Dominican woman should act, especially concerning the expected tight-knit connection between her mother and herself, this same proximity and dependence on one another contributes to Lola’s defiance of her mom.

While she is expected to be loyal and dutiful to her mom, as her culture dictates, her refusal plays to her disadvantage when she fails to fulfill the obedient daughter role. Lola does not listen or entertain the idea of pleasing her mother for a second. A common trait of females in Latino cultures is an obedient spirit towards the mother, especially when she is the only parental figure in their lives. Instead, Lola chooses constantly to ignore her mother’s advice. Even in

⁴⁷ Slang term for a woman’s reproductive organ

rebellion, Lola's refusal to listen to her mom could potentially be interpreted as part of her hybridity in the story. The standard requires absolute devotion to her mother's pleas, though she refuses to uphold this standard, instead enacting a more independent approach. This independence differs from the expected Dominican family structure. Joie Davidow, editor of *Las Mamis*, explains the Latino relationship stimulating the mother-daughter dynamic, by stating, "our mothers have enormous power over us all" (viii). Thus, in order to ensure a harmonious life, Lola must acknowledge and submit to this power. However, Lola does not, and instead, always stands up for herself, defying her mom by questioning her treatment and parenting techniques. When her mom yells, "This is how you treat your mother?" Lola replies, "And this is how you treat your daughter?" (*OW* 55). Thus, Lola's defiance is inconsistent with expectations for the good Dominican daughter who should never speak up against her own mother.

While her culture requires a close-knit relationship with her mom, Lola's fulfillment of this standard guarantees her constant state of agitation and pain. Lola must choose between upholding the standard which would cause her constant undermining and pain, or refuse to live up to the standard and face what Butler would constitute as a cultural punishment. The relationship between the two is damaging, and at best, is only preparing Lola for the future adversity that she will face as a mother. For instance, Lola reveals, "Of course everyone thought I was the worst daughter ever" (*OW* 59). Lola, despite her efforts to help her family, is consistently torn down, though eventually she learns to abstain from the roles that her mom expects of her. That is, she becomes fed up, and thus, quits being the daughter that the Dominican standard dictates. When Beli picks up Lola from the Dominican Republic, after Lola admittedly has the best time of her life in her native country, Beli undermines Lola and insults her: "And then the big moment, the one every daughter dreads. My mother looking at me over.

I'd never been in better shape, never felt more beautiful and desirable in my life, and what does the bitch say? / Coño, pero tú sí eres fea⁴⁸. / Those fourteen months—gone. Like they'd never happened" (*OW* 208). With one simple statement, Beli is able to completely obliterate over a year's worth of experiences, growth, and happiness. Thus, while a typical family is expected to be supportive, it is quite opposite in this novel.

However, despite Beli's mistreatment of Lola, it would be a mistake to fully consider Lola as a saintly martyr. While Beli's character may be despicable, her maternal title does demand a certain level of respect—which is surely more than what Lola is willing to give. Esmeralda Santiago and Joie Davidow, in *Las Mamis: Favorite Latino Authors Remember Their Mothers*, state, "[Immigrants] . . . have often managed to raise children of great achievement against great odds. And rich or poor, they link their children to something precious that might be otherwise lost: to another country, another time another language—the mother tongue" (vii-viii). While Beli may not be the exemplary mother, Lola does not consider the vast amount of work that her mother undertook in setting out for America. Lola's character has various dynamics acting against her, yet she does not contribute to fulfilling at least a basic respect towards her mother. Instead, she loathes her mother, and often disrespects her.

Throughout the novel, Lola's disrespect often appears through statements of dissatisfaction. Her rejection of her mother is not only a rejection of her mother's parenting, but also a rejection of the cultural expectation that she will one day have to fulfill. For example, when Lola reveals that everyone was scared of her mother, Lola writes, "Fuck her, I said" (*OW* 58). Though a rather superficial, perhaps even meaningless dismissal of her mother as a result of her own emotional pain, the novel provides other excellent scenes that denote the high level of disrespect that Lola has for her mom. Lola neglects the obedience required by her culture. Lola's

⁴⁸ Damn, but you really are ugly.

callous attitude towards her mom does not consider her mother's aforementioned single parent role, or the fact that Beli has cancer. As the story progresses, Lola states, "My tía and our neighbor kept saying, Hija, she's your mother, she's dying, but I wouldn't listen. When I caught her hand a door opened. And I wasn't about to turn my back on it" (*OW* 59). However, Lola's character no longer wants to please her mom, despite how much her mother provided in order to ensure that Lola and her brother have enough to live on. As sad as this realization may be to readers, it nonetheless is important in revealing Lola's raw attitude towards her mother. Lola writes, describing a scene between her mother and herself, "And I said: This time I hope you die from it" (*OW* 63). Later in the novel, Lola's wish comes true, though prior to the mom's death, when Beli reveals that the cancer is back, Lola writes: "Oscar looked like he was going to cry. He put his head down. And my reaction? I looked at her and said: Could you please pass the salt?" (*OW* 63). This detached response not only expresses pure hatred, but it also betrays the bond between mother-daughter. Surely, the relationship is one of the most emotionally volatile within the novel, but Beli is nonetheless still her mother. She is the one who provides for the family that gave Lola and Oscar life, and ultimately, is the person and role that Lola will one day fulfill.

As the story later reveals, Lola's hatred of her mom, and her wish for independence actually accelerate her adoption of the role of mother later in the novel, an ironic turn of events given the constant turmoil between herself and her mother. Lola, in a rather reflective mood, realizes, "Now that I'm a mother myself I realize that she could not have been any different" (208), which validates, at least to a certain extent, Beli's parenting. Thus, Lola joins this cycle as a future mom. La Inca identifies this cycle as Lola prepares to leave the Dominican Republic. In

a conversation with Lola, La Inca states, “Your mother was a diosa^[49]. But so cabeza dura^[50]. When she was your age we never got along” (*OW* 75). Oddly enough, these same characteristics are part of Lola’s make up as she is both a goddess physically and also stubborn, much like her mother. Thus, as much as she tries to depart from her mother’s grasp, and her eventual fulfillment of her role, there is absolutely nothing she can do to avoid this; it is almost as if she was destined—or mandated by her culture—to fulfill the motherhood revealed towards the completion of the novel.

Is Lola Dominican?

An issue with which Lola and Oscar must both wrestle, especially as first generation immigrant children—first to America, then back to the Dominican Republic—is their Dominican identity, and the way other Dominicans perceive them. An appreciation for hybridity respect would support their dual-citizenship to both countries as American and Dominican passport holders. Lola is in fact Dominican by birth, but she is sometimes perceived as non-Dominican. While there are many reasons that contribute to this unrecognized nationality—from jealousy of schoolmates to her changing physique as a result of physical exercise—her inability to fulfill Dominican gender roles dismisses her Dominican identity.

Lola’s unrecognized Dominican identity, especially during her time in her homeland, is a crucial topic that also fits within immigrant literature. As Baeza Ventura states, “An additional strategy employed in exile and immigrant literature is the imagery of the United States as hell and the homeland as paradise” (118). Lola confirms this as she shares the opinion of one of her schoolmates that no better island exists than their homeland: “Nothing like Santo Domingo” (207). However, despite her longing to belong, she is still alienated. After she loses a race in the

⁴⁹ A goddess

⁵⁰ Hard headed, a phrase used for stubbornness

Dominican Republic, she writes, “You ain’t so great, are you, gringa, the girls on the other teams hissed at me and I could only hang my head” (*OW* 74); the girls from the opposing team, who are natives to the Republic, identify Lola as a “gringa,” denying her Dominican identity; Lola’s response in hanging her head is therefore not necessarily due to her poor finish in the race but because of the way “authentic” Dominicans disallow her identity as a Dominican woman.

Similar to the situation faced by her brother, her passport and birth certificate are not enough to authenticate her Dominican identity. Lola’s physical limitations and personality alienate her, and cause the other native Dominicans not to recognize her as one of them. Therefore, Díaz’s novel reveals that birth and a longing to live in a country do not determine identity within that country. For example, despite Lola’s pleas to stay in the Dominican Republic, she is once again displaced from this land that she considers her own. Her identity is not necessarily a quality that she can possess or control; rather, it is something of a rite of passage that may only be constructed after fulfilling certain roles. Ziarkowska adds, “Unlike Oscar, Lola celebrates her Dominican heritage rather than a denial of that heritage” (144). In contrast to Oscar, Lola’s loves the Dominican Republic from the start, but even this is not enough to confirm her Dominican identity. In leaving the Dominican Republic, she cries and an old man attempts to comfort her: “Santo Domingo will always be there. It was there in the beginning and it will be there at the end” (*OW* 210); in context, however, this comforting is actually an act of ridicule, highlighting the impossibility for a woman to be able to fulfill her gender roles. As the man suggests, Santo Domingo, a signifier for Dominican culture, whether at home or abroad, will outlive Lola, whether she finally achieves that Dominican recognition or not. In short, the system will likely never change, so Lola’s character is merely an insignificant piece within this complex system.

Lola's Demise

For Lola's character, in contrast to Belicia and Oscar, her demise does not arrive in the form of her death; rather, and perhaps more empathetic to Lola, her death is less tragic and less lonesome, but still unfortunate. As Ziarkowska states, "Born fifty years after the death of Trujillo and divided from the dictator's land by an ocean, the little girl is protected by the wisdom of three generations of women in her family. Remember? Fukú always gets its man, and Lola does learn her lesson" (147). Yuniór reveals at an earlier point in the narrative that "[Lola] was living in Edison with some of her girlfriends, working at some office or another, saving money for her next big adventure" (*OW* 199), clearly identifying a somewhat independent Lola. However, towards the end of the novel, Yuniór reveals that "after half a year of taking care of her mother Lola had what a lot of females call their Saturn return" (*OW* 325), "[a]nd then in August, after I got that Lola had met someone in Miami, which was where she had moved, that she was pregnant and was getting married" (*OW* 324). Her final lesson then—though she has consistently learned of the humiliation and isolation facing those who fail to conform with her inability to dress, or perform a certain way—is her confinement and eventual place as a married woman with children.

In contrast to Oscar, whose inability to perform ended in a brutal death, or Beli, whose inability to perform ended in the return and eventual victory of cancer, Lola's ending presents itself in an arguably more hopeful light. Earlier when she runs away, she says, "My plan was that we would go to Dublin. I had met a bunch of Irish guys on the boardwalk and they had sold me on their country . . . I really believed it would happen too. That's how deluded I was by then" (68), expressing her wish to travel and not be bound by any familial expectations or any other hindrances, especially after running away from her expertly manipulative mother. Thus, the fact

that she ends up in a seemingly safe and nurturing family does not contradict her demise; rather, it lies in the death of her dreams of traveling, being independent, and having a child. In all, she is punished for all those years of defying her mother, yearning for independence, by being a mother herself, and being shackled to a family.

Conclusion

Lola's character, after Yuniór, may have the least exposition within *Oscar Wao*, but even in the brief time that this character appears in the novel, her character confirms how under Butler's theory in which failed performances are culturally punished. While some parts of her persona are hybrid in nature—which are necessary for her to adapt and overcome various tragic aspects of her part—her failure to measure up to a certain standard allows for the constant punishment that she experiences throughout the novel. From the beginning of the story, she is alienated from the ideal Dominican archetype due to her unwillingness to conform to the obedient daughter standard. As she constantly defies her mother, her choices prevent her happiness and the completion of her goals. However, this relationship also illuminates Díaz's feminism in explaining that the system is rigged against women, as they have multiple cultural forces acting against them. If Lola does not side with her mother completely, she is estranged, and if she surrenders to her, she will face a life of constant humiliation and pain. Along with other aspects of Lola's character, her inability to fulfill the often-conflicting roles contributes to her demise. Because the causes, as valid reasons for certain behaviors, are rarely acknowledged, Dominican women like Lola will never live in peace; the system will always play against them.

Chapter Three: Belicia Cabral: The Fall of the Strongest Woman in the World

“That night was the first time in my life that I had to deal with the possibility that my mom was a person and not just somebody who washed my underwear and cooked my meals. She had a world inside of her, I realized. A world. It was like suddenly finding yourself in a depth of water. It was an astonishment.” (“How (In a Time)” 162)

Introduction

Finally, Belicia Hypatia Cabral, or Beli, also supports the dismissal of the fukú as the fundamental reason for the misfortunes and demise of the characters within the story. Instead, Beli’s character similarly verifies the Butler’s theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished as Beli’s story reveals the long-existing patriarchal system that punishes those who do not live up to the Dominican gender standards. Beli, mother to Oscar and Lola, and adopted daughter to La Inca, has the longest historical range of all three characters in *Oscar Wao*: Díaz shows the reader the history from before her birth, in the days of her father, Doctor Abelard Luis Cabral, all the way until her miserable death from a recurring cancer.

Though third in this analysis, her character is nonetheless important in understanding how the overtly patriarchal Dominican culture dominates those who do not conform to its standards. Most importantly, Beli’s life story reveals how this system not only operates in modern times, with Oscar and Lola, but also how this system has been active from Doctor Abelard’s time during the Trujillo reign until the present day narration in *Oscar Wao*. As some of her characteristics resemble a hybrid construction, Beli can also help illuminate how such hybrid characters were also unable to fit or even exist during her time. Because Beli’s narrative

spans the longest amount of time, her character exposes how the culture's punishment of failed performances can help explain the entirety of the Cabral/de León multi-generational curse, as opposed to relying on the mythical fukú as justification.

Similar to her children, Oscar and Lola, Beli's character does not conform to the Dominican gender stereotypes. Since her birth, she could not fulfill typical gender expectations, and her voluntary decisions further alienate her from the ordinary Dominican woman. Additionally, as explained in Lola's analysis, the system appears stacked against women, and presents them with opposing, almost impossible to meet expectations. For instance, they must be good daughters to their mothers, a behavior that requires obedience, purity, and the constant prioritizing of their mother's wishes. However, as sexual creatures whose importance is rooted in their physical beauty, they should also prepare for marriage in order to be able to please men. Because Beli does not conform fully to the competing roles for a woman, both as a daughter and sexual creature, she undergoes constant alienation and punishment that arises from failing to adhere to her gender expectations.

Beli's Story

Prior to assessing how her character fails to live up to the gender norms, her inherited physical traits and her choices throughout the novel, as well as her interaction with the fukú must be stated in order to show how expectations for cultural performance could also replicate the same effect without the supernatural. Showing how the fukú plays a huge role in Beli's wondrous life clarifies how Butler's theory accounts for the cause and effect relationship between failure to perform and punishment. In order to see how Beli's character is impacted by the fukú, Stavans' aforementioned argument that "[t]he past affects everything" (2352) is crucial. Not only does his template confirm the cause and effect relationship between decision and

punishment, but it also proves how Beli's existence is victim to the past. Yuniór reveals the Cabral family's standing in the latter half of the novel: "The Cabrals were, as you might have guessed, members of the Fortunate People" (*OW* 213). However, this position as "Fortunate People" changes when Abelard does not "give" his daughter to Trujillo. As Yuniór reveals, "They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard's daughter, but when he couldn't snatch her, out of spite, he put a fukú on the family's ass. Which is why all the terrible shit that happened happened" (*OW* 243). Therefore, this entire belief in the fukú was always active throughout Beli's life, even before birth.

Arguably, this scene can also be understood through Butler's theory of culturally reinforced performativity. Because the job of Dominican folk was to please Trujillo, or at least to seek to fulfill his wishes from a nationalistic standpoint, then the action of giving up one's daughter would be the normal expectation. On the other hand, failure to give one's daughter to Trujillo would then constitute a breach in cultural expectations for a father, and thus, would require some form of punishment. Yuniór states that ". . . in Trujillo's DR if you . . . put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio⁵¹]like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* . . . So common was the practice . . . that there were plenty of men in the nation . . . who, believe it or not, offered up their daughters *freely* to [Trujillo]" (*OW* 217). Abelard's choice to withhold his daughter from Trujillo, despite the dictator's request for his daughter (*OW* 232-33), acts as a striking instance of defiance against the brutal dictator, which contradicts Abelard's expected performance of passively giving in to Trujillo. Because he fails to "perform" in this way, his misfortune arrives in the form of an eighteen-year sentence (*OW* 247), his wife Socorro's death, and the tragic, not so coincidental death of his other two daughters—one drowned, and the other killed by a stray bullet (*OW* 249-

⁵¹ Performing fellatio.

50).

However, the repercussions of Abelard's defiance—or failure to perform—were not limited to just that era; they lasted longer into Beli's life. According to La Inca, “Maybe people are right, La Inca despaired. Maybe you [Beli] are cursed.” (*OW* 128). This comment reveals that it is not only a familial tradition to talk about the fukú, but also a cultural construct that is widely believed by even those outside of the family. Nonetheless, the fukú's presence in Beli's narrative highlights the long-standing oppressive system, which can be best explained via Butler's theory of culturally reinforced performativity as activated by the Dominican patriarchy, and not a made-up curse.

Historical Patriarchy and Sex Culture

The importance of understanding the overtly pro-Trujillo patriarchal society within the various generations of Dominican culture in *Oscar Wao* is equally as important as the family's multigenerational belief in the fukú. Yuniór states, “Then [in Beli's time], like now, Santo Domingo was to popóla^[52] what Switzerland was to chocolate. And there was something about the binding, selling, and degradation of women that brought out the best in the Gangster; he had an instinct for it, a talent—call him the Caracaracol of Culo^[53]” (*OW* 121). While the Gangster will have a proper analysis later in this chapter, this quote—as it relates to a very Dominican male—shows how sexual pleasure is foregrounded within this culture, according to Yuniór, “then, [and] now” (*OW* 121).

Additionally, this overtly sexual culture is also important in understanding the milieu of Beli's birth. While conversing with Abelard, his mistress reveals that she is pregnant, though Yuniór reveals that it was a false alarm: “There was relief—like he needed anything else on his

⁵² Female genitalia.

⁵³ Caracaracol could possibly be a child of Caribbean goddess Itiba. Or, it could also mean “Ass Face Snail” (Caracol translates to Snail, Cara to face, and Culo to Ass).

plate, and what if it had been another daughter?—but also disappointment, for Abelard wouldn't have minded a little son, even if the *carajito*⁵⁴ would have been the child of a mistress and born in his darkest hour" (*OW* 235). This quote highlights the preference of a male child over a female child, especially with the knowledge that Abelard only has daughters; it also reveals a much deeper reason for why he prefers to have a male child and does not welcome the possibility of having a female child. Abelard is aware of what having a female child entails. Whether or not Abelard is a full Trujillo supporter is not of importance; however, his failure to overtly object against this patriarchal system—which he is a part of—shows his commitment to the system where “[y]oung women have no opportunity to develop in this country” (*OW* 220). In other words, Abelard is not one who questions this patriarchy; instead, he seems to enable it. Yuniors writes, “When banquets were held in Trujillo’s honor Abelard always drove to Santiago to attend. He arrived early, left late, smiled endlessly, and *didn’t say nothing*” (*OW* 215), effectively showing that it is men like Abelard who allow this oppressive system to continue and ensure that this system will be there for his daughters, eventually resulting in the death of two and the constant suffering of one.

Beli’s Physical Qualities

Beli’s physical qualities are some of her most apparent qualities that guarantee the alienation she experiences throughout her childhood. Under Butler’s theory of culturally reinforced performativity, her inability to have favorable physical features—a failed performance—contributes to her constant punishment that alienates her from most mainstream Dominicans. Because she comes from darker parents, Beli inherits her mother’s dark skin: “The family claims the first sign was that Abelard’s third and final daughter, given the light early on in her father’s capsulization, was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black black . . .*

⁵⁴ Literal: little fuck; within the sentence, used to refer to a little baby, with the connotation of the literal definition.

That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen" (*OW* 248). As Díaz reveals in Oscar and Lola's characters, this blackness is not a feature that is welcomed in Dominican culture, often because it forged a resemblance to Haitian immigrants that were unwelcomed in Dominican soil. The Haitian and Dominican genetics attribute to Beli's mestiza-like skin, thus providing her a hybridity that she does not have power over. However, despite the fact that she is unable to control her skin color, she is nonetheless punished by her culture. Yunió, while introducing Beli's childhood, also presents the town of Baní, as "[a] city famed for its resistance to blackness, and it was here, alas, that the darkest character in our story resided" (*OW* 78). Thus, Dominican Republic's rejection of blackness is also dismissal of Beli.

Since blackness represented such a problematic construct, even generations prior to Oscar and Lola's existence, it is clear to see how racial differences contributed to the harsh treatment of a girl like Beli. Yunió writes, "To make matters worse, she was born . . . underweight, sickly. She has problems crying, problems nursing, and *no one outside the family wanted the darkchild to live*" (emphasis added *OW* 252). Thus, it is her color that jeopardizes even her existence at first. Without the care that she receives from Zoila, a woman that welcomed this mestiza and shared her breast milk with her, Beli would not have been able to survive (*OW* 252). It is also her dark skin that alienates her from her biological family and causes her transference from one family to the next, "on to some even more distant relatives" (*OW* 252). If displacement as a child after her family's death was not enough punishment, her remaining relatives committed an even more despicable act towards her: "The girl, though, was immensely stubborn, and the parents who weren't her parents flipped when the girl kept skipping out on work to attend classes, and in the ensuing brawl, the poor muchachita⁵⁵] got burned, horribly; the father, who was not her father, splashed a pan of hot oil on her naked back. The burn nearly killing her" (*OW* 255). Of

⁵⁵ Young lady

course, it may not only be her blackness that causes the father figure in this setting to burn Beli; however, Beli's skin color is the main motivator for her family's dissatisfaction with her that make such tragic acts plausible.

Further, the alienation that she faces as a baby and child is not limited to her family; rather, it continues outside the family in her later years. In her private school, El Redentor,^[56] Beli stands out as distinct in opposition to the majority of the students described by Yuniór as "whiteskinned children of the regime's top ladronazos^[57]" (*OW* 83). According to Ziarkowska, "In the Dominican context, it is Beli's blackness that becomes her defining characteristic and a reason for her social rejection. During her brief stay at one of the more prestigious schools, in which whiteness is a synonym for attractiveness and social privilege, Beli stands out as the racial Other" (142). Thus, this blackness, a characteristic that she is unable to change, continues to be a reason that ensures her alienation and social rejection in the private school setting. Díaz portrays the absurdity of this situation as even Beli's Asian schoolmate, who has trouble even communicating in Spanish, marginalizes Beli. As Yuniór reveals, "This was who Beli sat next to her first two years of high school. But even Wei had some choice words for Beli . . . You black, she said, fingering Beli's thin forearm. *Black-black*" (*OW* 84). In this scene, Beli, a racial Other, is further marginalized by her Chinese schoolmate who cannot even speak Spanish, who seems like she should be the primary outlier.

In addition to her blackness, another physical feature that contributes to her alienation and punishment is her beauty. However, this physical trait is one that also ensures her failure based on the conflicting expectations within Dominican culture. Early in the novel, during one of Lola's sections, she reveals a conversation between herself and La Inca that her mom's beauty

⁵⁶ The Redeemer

⁵⁷ Big thieves.

was one that exceeded both Lola and La Inca. Yuniór writes, “Abuela snorted. Guapa^[58] soy yo. Your mother was a diosa^[59]. But so cabeza dura^[60]” (*OW* 75), revealing that aside from her dark complexion, Beli was a stunning woman. As Yuniór reveals, “... Beli was a girl, for fucks’ sake; she had no power or beauty (yet) or talent or family that could help her transcend, only La Inca, and La Inca wasn’t about to help our girl escape anything” (*OW* 81). Here, it seems as if beauty is one of the characteristics that could allow Beli to escape her current situation living with the La Inca. This beauty persists as Beli grows older, and it is one of the characteristics that could potentially play in her favor: “Where before Beli had been a gangly ibis of a girl, pretty in a typical sort of way, by summer’s end she’d become un mujerón^[61] total, acquiring that body of hers, that body that made her famous in Baní” (*OW* 91). Instead, Yuniór narrates, “For the first month, that is. Gradually Beli began to see beyond the catcalls and the *Dios mío asesina*^[62] and the *y ese tetario*^[63] and the *que pechonalidad*^[64] to the hidden mechanisms that drove these comments” (*OW* 93) revealing that Beli’s beauty only guarantees her constant reduction to an estimation of her physical beauty by Dominican men. This beauty, though able to guarantee her some form of freedom, actually conflicts with the goals that La Inca had set out for her.

Because La Inca wanted to honor Beli’s parents’ professions—her father the doctor, her mother the nurse—she also wanted Beli to be a doctor and to focus on her studies. Yuniór reveals that this difference in expectations also caused Beli’s constant alienation: “It was stubbornness and the expectations of La Inca that kept Belicia lashed to the mast, even though she was miserably alone and her grades were worse than Wei’s” (*OW* 85). La Inca’s expectations

⁵⁸ Good looking.

⁵⁹ Goddess.

⁶⁰ Hardheaded, or stubborn.

⁶¹ Very attractive woman.

⁶² My God, assassin

⁶³ Play on words between chest and the abundance of her chest

⁶⁴ Play on words between pecho (chest) and personalidad (personality)

were met with Beli's recently found beauty that led her to focus on boys instead of paying attention to her studies. While her beauty could help counteract her dark complexion and get her out of La Inca's home, it was actually a feature that played to her detriment. On one hand, her beauty could have helped, but in dismissing her studies, she was also destroying her academic future, as well as causing the strife between her and her mother figure.

Beli's Longing

Aside from her physical features, Beli's longing to travel far from the Dominican Republic, and far from her role as La Inca's daughter, contributes to her downfall. Early on, Yuni6r reveals Beli's dissatisfaction with her current state: "Everything about her life irked her; she wanted, with all her heart, something *else* . . . [this dissatisfaction] had been with her *all her life*" (OW 79). Additionally it is equally important to be fair and understand the reasoning behind Beli's desire to remove herself from her current situation. In expressing Beli's longing to travel, Yuni6r reveals Beli's complex reasoning, and camps out on Beli's wishes:

If I had to put it to words I'd say what she wanted, more than anything, was what she'd always wanted throughout her Lost Childhood: to escape. *From what* is easy to enumerate: the bakery, her school, dull-ass Ban6, sharing a bed with her madre,^[65] the inability to buy the dresses she wanted, having to wait until fifteen to straighten her hair, the impossible expectations of La Inca, the fact that her parents had died when she was one, the whispers that Trujillo had done it, those first years of her life when she'd been an orphan, the horrible scars from that time, her own despised black skin. (OW 80)

In addition to her dissatisfaction, Beli's plans also conflict La Inca's. Whereas Beli's character sought "something else," La Inca wanted something different for her daughter—something

⁶⁵ Mother.

somewhat more beneficial to Beli. Instead, Beli's selfish longing to flee begins the path that renders her unable to become a doctor, and thus, her inability to have the potential to flee. Without an education, she is restricted to relying on a man for financial support, which is necessary to accomplish her goal. Yuniór writes, "La Inca talked about Beli becoming a female doctor . . . imagined her hija^[66] raising test tubes up to the light, but Beli usually passed her school days dreaming about the various boys around her" (*OW* 87). This unwillingness to pursue the role of the intellectual woman that La Inca wants Beli to be causes her to seek out a job, which causes La Inca to lament over her daughter's choices: "La Inca of course was anguished by Beli's Fall from princesa^[67] to mesera^[68]—what is happening to the world?" (*OW* 107). Beli constantly denies herself the opportunity of achieving a favorable profession, which in turn, prevents the only means of independence and ability to fulfill her dreams without the need for a man.

Beli's wishes and rationale for leaving her studies could be reduced to her "inextinguishable longing for elsewhere" (*OW* 77); however, her desires that conflicted with La Inca's should not dismiss the possibilities that La Inca afforded her. Without La Inca, Beli would not have survived the tragic childhood she experienced, and further, would not have been able to enter the prestigious El Redentor. Therefore, Beli had the possibility to achieve more than what she could have without La Inca; however, she allows her longing to depart, for elsewhere, to undermine the great privilege of studying and opportunity to live up to her parents' professions. Instead, she dismisses her schooling, and thus, prevents any opportunity of making a career for herself. Not only does this undermine La Inca's presence in the story as her mother, but also dismisses any opportunity for independence outside a man for happiness and welfare. Her

⁶⁶ Daughter.

⁶⁷ Princess.

⁶⁸ Waitress.

longing to flee conflicts with the rootedness that Dominican females must ascribe to; while her free spirit may resemble that of a hybrid that diverts from the mainstream identity, her departure from how she should perform ensures her unsuccessful life, which is quite different than what she could have achieved.

La Inca, Beli's Mother

Almost identical to Lola's relationship with Beli, Beli's relationship with La Inca is also exemplary of the cause and effect relationship between the failure to fulfill gender roles and the punishment that arises from this failure. However, La Inca and Beli's relationship, compared to Beli and Lola's, differs due to the fact that La Inca was the ideal mother to Beli; Yuniór writes, "after all, [Beli] had a madre^[69] who didn't beat her, who (out of guilt or inclination) spoiled her rotten, bought her flash clothes and paid her bakery wages, peanuts, I'll admit, but that's more than what ninety-nine percent of other kids in similar situations earned, which was nathan^[70]" (*OW* 79). Thus, Beli enjoyed a much better situation than her own daughter, who experienced harsh treatment and constant belittlement under Beli, which caused Lola to consider her mom "the worst" (*OW* 55). By contrast, Beli recognizes that La Inca is the only parent or support that she has, and in response, La Inca says, "And look how well you've treated me. Look how well" (*OW* 128), mocking the actual treatment that La Inca receives. It is clear that Beli is the worst possible daughter, even considering the behavior of her own daughter Lola; when Yuniór narrates Beli's time at La Inca's house, he writes, "Every morning the same routine: Hypatía Belicia Cabral, ven acá^[71]!" "You ven acá, Beli muttered under her breath. You" (*OW* 80). Her words depict a clear defiance and disrespect towards La Inca. As the only woman that will ever support her unconditionally, La Inca deserves more respect, yet this is respect that Beli does not

⁶⁹ Mother

⁷⁰ Nothing

⁷¹ Come here.

give. This lack of respect is one that foreshadows Beli and Lola's strained relationship. Surely, it is Beli that inflicts the most pain in this relationship; however, Beli's punishment by Lola's disobedience seems almost justified and karmic to her past treatment of La Inca.

Beli's First Romantic Heartbreak

In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz clearly identifies Beli's three major romantic heartbreaks: Jack Pujols, the Gangster, and Oscar and Lola's father. These heartbreaks are a result of her avoidance of La Inca's advice as well as her complete trust in men for fulfillment. It should be noted that La Inca often warns Beli of the way that her actions will likely lead to her distress; yet she fails to listen to her mother, defying the obedient daughter standard, which causes her punishment in the form of these heartbreaks. In Oscar's conversation with La Inca, she says, "Your mother could have been a doctor just like your grandfather was . . . What always happens. Un maldito hombre^[72]" (*OW* 31), showing that men, or at least a complete reliance on a man, always results in the failure to fulfill a certain goal. While La Inca implores Beli to continue her education, the failure to heed her mother's advice causes Beli to give in to her desire for a man, resulting in her inability to be independent. As the novel continues, Yuniór writes, "So what happened? ... A boy happened . . . Her First" (*OW* 89), which seems to highlight that anytime Beli is headed for heartbreak, it is due to her infatuation with a man against her mother's wishes.

Surely, if Beli did not have a mother figure to give her this advice, she should be excused, or at least pardoned to a certain degree; however, she is constantly warned about the dangers of fully surrendering to a man. Yuniór writes, "God save your soul, La Inca grumbled, if you think *boys* are an answer to *anything*." (*OW* 88). Instead, she chooses to take advantage of her beauty, and gives into Constantina's advice, a waitress that "arrived to lunch straight from a night of partying, smelling of whiskey and stale cigarettes" (*OW* 112), which is one of Beli's most

⁷² A damn man

detrimental decisions. This woman instructs Beli to “[f]orget that hijo de la porra,^[73] . . . Every desgraciado^[74] who walks in here is in love with you. You could have the whole maldito world if you wanted” (*OW* 113). Not only does her infatuation with men combine with her acknowledgment of her physical beauty and her longing to depart and have it all, but she also chooses to listen to Constantina’s advice against her mother’s.

In addition to her refusal of her mother’s advice, Beli also has a naïve outlook on what men’s interest implies. According to Beli, “I’m allowed to do anything I want, Beli said stubbornly, with my husband” (*OW* 101), implying that sex with Jack promises her a future marriage to him. Instead, she soon realizes that it would render nothing but the loss of her virginity, scolding from her teachers, and scorn from La Inca.

Beli’s Second Romantic Heartbreak

This naiveté continues in the face of her second heartbreak, this time with the Gangster. This heartbreak is also caused by her belief that a man will be there to provide and stay with her, greatly contrasting to La Inca’s warnings of making a future for herself. In professing his love for Beli, the Gangster says, “I’ll buy you a house in both places just so you can know how much I love you” (*OW* 126); however, this pledge is superficial in its sincerity. According to Yunion, “The Gangster might have harbored love for Venezuela and its many long-legged mulatas . . . but it was Cuba that clove his heart, that felt to him like home” (*OW* 122). Beli, as a dark woman, could easily resemble a Cuban woman, widely known for their darker skin; the Gangster’s love for Beli, then, is not necessarily rooted in true love, but perhaps his attraction to her Cuban resemblance. Whether such love is superficial, or not, it is nonetheless fulfilling to Beli; Yunion writes that “[this love] felt unbelievably good to Beli, shook her to her core,” though moments

⁷³ Forget that son of a bitch

⁷⁴ Every unfortunate man

earlier, he also mentions that “[t]here’s a pretty solid argument to be made that La Inca was right; the Gangster was simply an old chulo⁷⁵] preying on Beli’s naïveté” (*OW* 126-27). Beli’s guilelessness causes her to continue to trust in men wholeheartedly, and also remains a recurring response within her relationship to the Gangster, which results in her pregnancy (*OW* 136). As Beli is ignorant and innocent with her belief in men, she does not realize that even the Gangster will not be there for her despite the fact that she is carrying his child; Yuniór writes, “In her memory he never told her to get rid of it. But later, when she was freezing in the basement apartments in the Bronx and working her fingers to the bone, she reflected that he *had* told her exactly that. But like lovergírls everywhere, she had heard only what she wanted to her” (*OW* 137).

Yuniór, continuing to describe Beli’s realization after she is assaulted, writes “she’d been *played*, by the Gangster, by Santo Domingo, by her own dumb needs, to ignite it” (*OW* 148); in this scene, Yuniór not only reveals that the Gangster played her, but that Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic’s capital and the symbol for the cultural patriarchy, is the one that ultimately plays her, and thus punishes her. Beli’s main problem is her belief in the Gangster’s promises; Yuniór writes, “Poor Beli. She believed in the Gangster. Was loyal to the end” (*OW* 143), and it is this loyalty which springs from the naïveté she maintains towards men that results in her perpetual sorrow: “During the day she would sit by the window in silence, very much like La Inca after her husband drowned. She did not smile, she did not laugh, she talked to no one, not even her friend Dorca. A dark veil had closed over her, like nata⁷⁶] over café” (*OW* 160). Her continual belief in the faithfulness of men acts as a form of defiance against her mother and leads her to these unfortunate consequences. Her failure to perform in accordance to her

⁷⁵ Flirt

⁷⁶ A creamy spread

mother's wishes, then, results in the punishment she receives.

Beli's Third Romantic Heartbreak

In the novel, Yunior spends very little time narrating Beli's third heartbreak; but this heartbreak also connects Butler's theory of culturally reinforced failed performances with Beli's misfortune. In this third occurrence, Yunior does not provide much detail to Beli's scenario. However, it seems that this third romantic heartbreak also includes the heartbreak that Beli faces travelling to America. Yunior concludes Beli's time in the Dominican Republic by revealing the uncertainty she faces travelling to a new land:

Her fiercest hope? That she will find a man. What she doesn't know: the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías,^[77] the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her heart. What else she doesn't know: that the man next to her would end up being her husband and the father of her two children, that after two years together he would leave her, her third and final heartbreak, and she would never love again. (*OW* 164)

Even after the second heartbreak, it appears that Beli has not yet realized her unreasonable hope in men. Instead, her longing for a man once again explains that while "she will find a man," he will leave her "after two years together."

In addition to this romantic heartbreak, her final departure from the Dominican Republic, an event she longed for so long, also causes her heartbreak. Because she travels to a new land, her physical presence becomes a *mestiza*, the hybrid figure of a woman belonging to one nation embarking to a new one that will provide the possibility of adding new features to her identity. Yet, being a hybrid results in pain because she does not stay in the Dominican Republic. The act of traveling and being a hybrid rejects the purity of the Dominican standard. Thus, the

⁷⁷ Factories.

punishment for failed performances is unfair, as it does not take into consideration what it means to travel to a new country, or appreciate the circumstances that force Beli to migrate. As evident in *Oscar Wao*, she is able to raise her children despite this third absence of a partner.

Interestingly enough, the conditions of Beli's third heartbreak are almost identical to Díaz's life story in regards to his father's absence: "My moms had had her own problems... She was still grieving over my pops. The nigger had pretty much shipwrecked her—abandoning her in a state where you need a car to survive, where she didn't have any family nearby, in a neighborhood cut off from any economic tides whatsoever . . . I believe this was one of the darkest periods in my mom's life" ("How (in a Time of Trouble)" 157). These stories, one fictional and another biographical, show that raising a family as an immigrant mother results in a rather bleak period. However, in Beli's story, trusting a man results in her misery—being a single mother is an additional component of her punishment. While females like Beli may not be in control of the situations that force them to be single mothers or to migrate to foreign lands, the text reveals how these females are punished through the decisions, or failed performances, they are forced to make.

Beli's Fourth Heartbreak: Her Children

Though Díaz considers Beli's final heartbreak to be the responsibility of Oscar and Lola's father, it would perhaps be more suitable to consider her children as her true, final heartbreak. While her relationship to Oscar does not elicit the same heartbreak as her relationship to Lola, his death does indicate a stronger heartbreak for her; losing a child creates a stronger hardship than the many romantic losses she experiences. Oscar was a good child, well-behaved and respectful of his mother, though his later infatuation with Ybón and his death thus leads to an immense deal of pain for Beli.

On the other hand, her strained relationship with Lola serves as an almost direct, karmic consequence of her once strained relationship with La Inca. Because she defies La Inca, she receives the same treatment as her own daughter, if not worse. In one of Lola's chapters, she writes, "But God, how we fought! Sick or not, dying or not, my mother wasn't going to go down that easily" (*OW* 61), highlighting that even in sickness, Beli had no problems fighting with Lola. Surely, the fighting coincides with the Beli's militant attitude; however, if Lola were to be respectful or caring of her mother's sickness, she would avoid fighting. Instead, she does not, the same way that Beli did not respect La Inca and encourages the fighting in her youth. Earlier in the novel, Lola also writes, "My tía and our neighbors kept saying, Hija, she's your mother, she's dying, but I wouldn't listen. When I caught her hand a door opened. And I wasn't about to turn my back on it" (*OW* 59). This statement further highlights the legacy of disrespect defining the mother-daughter relationship that originated with Beli and La Inca. Beli reveals this to Lola: "When she was your age we never got along" (*OW* 75), foreshadowing Lola and Beli's broken relationship. Nonetheless, the same disrespect continues later in Beli's life as a result of how she treated her La Inca—it was not La Inca who acted in the wrong. Instead, Beli's malice as a daughter causes her own daughter years later to put her through the same pain and constant struggle.

Is Beli Dominican?

Díaz is clear that Beli is at least biologically Dominican. However, as the novel continues, her inability to look Dominican causes characters to question her Dominican identity as revealed in the discussion of her physique. Further, as part of her unwillingness to stay in the Dominican Republic after trusting the Gangster to provide her a home in Miami, her dreams and constant bragging of leaving the Dominican Republic are the first instance of her mental

departure from the Dominican Republic. Yunió writes that “she bragged about how she would be living in Miami soon, wouldn’t have to put up with this un-country much longer” (*OW* 128). Thus, not only does she long to live elsewhere, but she also rejects her place within the Dominican Republic. This willingness to being uprooted and live elsewhere explain her hybrid wish to experience multiple cultures. However, this same longing contributes to her alienation as a Dominican woman. During her time as a dancer in El Hollywood, Beli is not seen as Dominican: “Everybody mistook her for a bailarina cubana^[78] from one of the shows and couldn’t believe that she was dominicano^[79] like them. It can’t be, no lo parece,^[80] etc., etc.” (*OW* 114). In addition, she is also prevented from seeming Dominican through her relationship with the Gangster. Because he longs for Cuba, his love for Beli is also rooted in his love of Cuban women (*OW* 122), who are of darker complexions. Thus, the relationship seems to highlight the fact that her peers do not necessarily see Beli as Dominican. These two factors prevent her from having an identity inside the country that she is born in, lives in, and is oppressed by.

Beli’s Demise

As the novel concludes, Beli’s fate resembles that of Oscar’s: death due to uncontrollable forces, which are consequences of failed culturally-dictated performances. Yunió writes, “There it was, the Decision That Changed Everything. Or as she broke it down to Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto*,^[81] she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America” (*OW* 113), acknowledging that her decision as a young woman, to go to El Hollywood to dance, resulted in her impending death. In

⁷⁸ Cuban dancer.

⁷⁹ Dominican.

⁸⁰ You do not look it.

⁸¹ This, referring to “the hospital, her children, her cancer, America”

other words, she acknowledges Stavans' principle that the past affects everything, in recognizing that, in fact, her past performances are responsible for her cancer, the miserable relationships with her children, and her desolation in America. Whether she attributes it to the fukú or not, Beli's acknowledgement effectively shows that her failure to have listened to her mother—in adopting culturally sanctioned performances—results in all her grievances and misfortunes.

However, as pitiable as this death may appear, falling to cancer after her son's death could be positively interpreted as a form of escape that she is allowed. According to Yuniór, "A year later [Oscar and Lola's] mother's cancer returned and this time it dug in and stayed. I visited her in the hospital with Lola. Six times in all. She would live for another ten months, but by then she'd more or less given up" (*OW* 323). Her surrender at this final stage in her life arrives after many battles to stay alive. In her mother's womb, as a malnourished baby, as a child burned, and as a young woman pregnant with the Gangster's baby, she sought to fight in order to accomplish her goals. Realizing that this was another battle where the result would also not be in her favor, she decides to no longer continue fighting. Her old age, and weakness caused by her cancer can effectively show her refusal to continue fighting. However, it is also her constant acquaintance with failure that causes her to quit. Thus, she is not bowing down to cancer; rather, she surrenders to the unknown system that has caused her constant misfortune. While some characters in the novel shout fukú, Butler's theory can reveal that it is merely the patriarchal system that punishes those who, like Beli, do not perform up to its standards.

Conclusion

Though Beli's death arrives more peacefully than Oscar's, her death is the most tragic due to the closeness that Díaz's multi-generational narration provides for her character. While "wondrous" would be a word that better fits Beli's life than Oscar's, her entire life is fraught with

constant despair that is continuously attributed to the fukú curse after her father defies Trujillo. However, her character's misfortune can also be explained using Butler's theory in which failed performances are culturally punished. Because culture punishes those who cannot live up to its cultural gender standards, Beli's whole life can be analyzed via a cause-and-effect formula between how she performs and the repercussions that these performances entail. The color of her skin—that can be seen as a costume worn for a performance—brings about constant alienation and her later misfortunes arise from her lack of independence, her utter trust in men, and her past choices that all affect her future. The results of her life choices and circumstances end in a strained relationship with her own daughter and a lonely death that follows the passing of Oscar.

Conclusion: A Still-Present Binary System within a World of Evolving Gender Ideals

In Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the harsh reality of the Dominican Republic's overtly patriarchal culture promotes intense machismo on the part of men; more specifically, it calls for a heightened emphasis on physical appeal and personality that seeks to achieve one goal: sexual achievement. Thus, for men, it requires everything in their makeup to try to achieve this sexual goal. For women, however, the expectations are much more complex, if not contradictory at times. For one, younger women must be obedient daughters who remain pure until they find a husband, and must then become subservient to these men who cannot guarantee that they themselves will be faithful.

Unfortunately, the characters within this novel are victims to an unknown force that is the source of their misfortune: the fukú, a curse that originated after dictator Trujillo's terrible reign of the Dominican Republic. While the fukú is the characters' explanation for their misfortune, it is merely rooted in folktales; even as a myth, the characters within this novel possess an authentic belief in the fukú's enduring presence in the life of a Dominican. However, because it is rooted in superstitious belief, it is insufficient to accept this curse as the explanation for the constant struggles of these characters. In *Oscar Wao*, the repercussions of its characters' failure to perform result in Oscar and Beli's deaths, and Lola's confinement to the domestic sphere.

A much better explanation for their misfortune can be found in Butler's theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished. In this theory, Butler contends that culture seeks to punish those who do not perform to their culture's strict gender norms. In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz's characters experience the repercussions, or what Butler calls, "strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" ("Performative Acts" 415). Butler's theory works as a more plausible explanation for the

misfortunes of Beli and her children. Since each character experiences immediate and long-lasting adversity, attributing this constant struggle to a folktale curse is insulting and reductive as an explanation for the pain that these characters experience. Oscar, Beli, and Lola, characters deeply rooted in Dominican culture, are unable to fulfill, or at least fully comply with, their culture's gender expectations. It is this failure that guarantees the constant struggles that they face, and which eventually leads to their demise. The theory may not allow for Dominican mysticism, but it does rely on recognition of the historical rigidity of the gender binary within Dominican culture, identifying the cause and effect relationship of the punishment that results from failed gender performances.

Oscar's expectations are clear-cut from his birth. As a male within a sexually saturated culture, his aim in life should be to fulfill personal sexual desire. However, despite these explicit and unambiguous expectations, he constantly fails to live up to these standards. From his awkward persona, overweight physique, and unwillingness to listen to Dominican alpha male advice, Oscar's character denies him the opportunity of being sexually active. This abandonment of Dominican male expectations causes his constant alienation at the hands of other Dominicans and the failure of others to recognize him as an actual Dominican male, and eventually, it sets in motion the chain of events that result in his death. Though there are various moving components to Oscar's character, Butler's Performative theory serves as a more accurate reason for Oscar's misfortune. Oscar's inaction and refusal to act result in different scenarios that seem like a result of a cause-and-effect relationship between failed performances and punishment.

Also important in this argument is Lola's character, whose actions and consequent repercussions can be better explained by Butler's theory as well. In the novel, Lola longs for freedom and does her best to attain it; she runs away during her teenage years and eventually

leaves for college and independently travels despite her mother's diminishing health. She also defies her mother throughout her life by constantly arguing and fighting with her. This longing for freedom and defiance to her mother are not part of a good Dominican daughter, and thus, result in her eventual confinement within a family at the end of the novel. The one role that she constantly defied in her youth is the same that she fulfills as Yuniór concludes the novel. Her character is also exemplary in showing the conflicting gender requirements set forth for women. While she must be a good, pure daughter, her beauty is a trait that she should not hide. This causes further strain with her mother, but also guarantees a life of constant battles; as the feminist narrator Yuniór reveals, if Oscar has it bad, it is far worse for women.

Finally, Beli's character also experiences the same inflexible system as her children. Born during the darkest times of the Trujillato,⁸² Beli's life is perhaps even more wondrous than Oscar's, but she is also born around the time when the fukú first comes into existence. Despite this proximity to the curse, the fukú is not enough to explain the constant struggles and eventual lonesome death of this character. As a young woman, Beli's reliance on men despite the possibility of her becoming a doctor prevents her independence and self-reliance. This causes her to seek men for companionship and fulfillment constantly; however, this same reliance on other men is also a main, if not exclusive, contributor to her three heartbreaks in the novel. Additionally, her role as a disobedient daughter to La Inca also results in a karmic, strained relationship with Lola, her daughter. Of all the characters, Beli's choices lead to her inevitable demise, from the recurring struggle between the mother-daughter relationship to how each time she relies on a man, she experiences a heartbreak.

Aside from the oppressive system that a patriarchal Dominican Republic entails, it is important to see how this argument reflects the world outside of Díaz's novel. In other words,

⁸² Trujillo reign

while the novel illustrates the constant punishment that the Dominican culture inflicts on those who transgress expectations, the lesson that stems from this constant struggle should also be noted outside of the world of *Oscar Wao*. First, it should be remembered that *Oscar Wao* and other stories narrating the plight of Latino immigrants into the United States feature “immigrant families living on the borders between countries, neighborhoods, social classes, linguistic groups, and races” (Wilson 384). Immigrants are already in a place of unknowing, removed and alienated from situations of familiarity. They also experience possible alienation at the hands of their home nations’ own oppressive systems. Thus, they not only live on the border between their new land and their homeland; they are also further alienated from any solace as their presence in a new land requires a form of hybrid composition that assimilates two cultures. Anzaldúa suggests this possibility especially within the bounds of Latino-American literature. In her work, Anzaldúa argues that a single identity does not allow a person to flourish; rather, this is where her idea of the new *mestiza* arises; she argues for a person to contain attributes from different cultures in order to assimilate within a foreign land. As these characters’ demise demonstrates, their culture was not yet prepared to accept a hybrid being, as the hybrid would not adhere strictly to the rigid binary system available at the time. Thus, Beli, Oscar, and Lola become pioneers of a hybrid idea that was not yet accepted. These hybrids cannot exist in peace, or at all.

Additionally, works like *Oscar Wao* are necessary to understand the plight of immigrants in the United States, in an effort to ameliorate the tensions among the cultural majority and immigrants. Díaz writes, “As an immigrant I was especially vulnerable to this kind of hand-me-down knowledge; I didn’t know jack about the country I was living in and any maps that would ease my way, even if they were fabricated and falsified ones, were better than nothing” (“Author’s Commentary” 68). A considerable portion of the growing Hispanic population will

have similar experiences to those of Díaz's characters. Immigrants already experience alienation and punishment, from rejection from their own culture to even harsher penalties. As Cervenak, Cespedes, Souza, and Straub, discussing Anzaldúa's *This Bridge We Call Our Own*, write, "Anzaldúa reminds us that 'it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions'" (78); these authors urge the need to arise after acknowledging oppressive systems, particularly in regards to systems that assign rigid gender roles. It is important that—as Americans and readers—we are not only aware of how such a system affects those within mainstream culture, but also that we know the repercussions to have a more sensible attitude towards those who risk all they have in leaving their homes for a better life. Reading Díaz's *Oscar Wao* and analyzing the strict gender dynamics helps fulfill the humanistic requirement of caring for others, and especially the outsider and the marginalized.

Although they hail from two different countries, Butler and Díaz have both experienced marginalization. Butler experiences this as a queer female, and Díaz experiences it as an immigrant; thus, this marginalization effectively brings them together. For a work from a white theorist to confirm the oppressive system not only shows the effectiveness of the theory, but it also provides an opportunity to reconcile the dominant culture with the immigrant minority. Finally, it is important to understand that neither Butler nor Díaz do not mean to "redescribe the world from the point of view of women" (Butler "Performative Acts" 413); instead, both authors are seeking to highlight the problems inherent in a patriarchal culture that rigidly dictates how a man and a woman must perform. In the cases of characters like Oscar, Beli, and Lola, such strict Trujillo-like dictatorship punishes those who perform outside of the norm in an attempt to assimilate within a new land. Thus, Butler's theory in which failed gender performances are culturally punished illuminates *Oscar Wao* as a novel that defines the Dominican patriarchal

culture as an archaic institution within a world that constantly calls for assimilation of different cultures, even though they may break down past strict gender roles.

Surely, there are aspects of Butler's theory and philosophy that may need more time and discussion to develop, primarily regarding what constitutes gender and sexuality. She acknowledges this shortcoming as she highlights that her theory represents an ideal that modern society does not yet support. For instance, her theory may work well in a post-patriarchal world; however, even in a world that contains such patriarchal systems, Butler's theory can help identify the damage that arises out of the patriarchy in these cultures. As Díaz's novel suggests, there are currently parts of the world that are still under a patriarchal system which promotes rigid gender binaries; these binaries dismiss any fluidity in gender performance that are part of Butler's performativity theory, but most importantly, dismiss any possibility for a character to exist, as Anzaldúa would argue, as a hybrid, possessing characteristics that may differ from what these patriarchal systems call for. Because Dominican culture holds gender to be a rigid, fixed system as shown in Díaz's novel, the culture itself does not allow Butler's full gender performativity theory to exist. Instead, only the cultural punishment component of this theory is helpful in understanding these marginalized characters in *Oscar Wao*.

Butler's belief in the fluidity of gender may seem idealistic, but it at least continues the efforts of feminists within a world where women and marginalized others are still undermined by oppressive forces. While Butler opposes such patriarchal binary-preferring cultures by arguing for gender as performatively constituted, she fails to address the benefits that a society with gender expectations may provide. Butler's theory is important in asserting modern feminist ideas about gender, in her words, as "a basically innovative affair" ("Performative Acts" 415), and is helpful in continuing the work of early feminists against a patriarchy that subdues those who

attempt to reroute harsh gender expectations. Without Butler's theory, the Dominican patriarchal culture would not be identified as the aggressor of people like Oscar, Lola, and Beli; instead, their misfortune and demise would be attributed to a curse that this same patriarchal culture invents to distract from the truth.

Zafa.

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