

From Urban Jungle, to Landscapes of Nostalgia and Collective Memory in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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“Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values.”

Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Particularly relevant to my analysis of Junot Díaz’s novel are Svetlana Boym’s compelling arguments about how nostalgia becomes a syndrome of globalization. Boym, in her groundbreaking work, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2008), provides a multi-faceted definition of longing and identifies how nostalgia is accumulated in the public domain (architecture, civic spaces, art, pop culture, literature) while exploring the implications of living nostalgically from both the individual’s standpoint and from that of the individual in relation to their collective settings. In the 17th and 18th centuries, nostalgia was considered a curable disease. Johannes Hoffer, in his *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia* (1688:1934) proposed leeches, opium therapy and trips to the Alps to cure the ailment. Hoffer considered that this notion was evoked by “vibrations of animal spirits through fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling” (*Medical Dissertation*, 384). Hofer “conceptualized” nostalgia as a medical and a neurologic disorder affecting primarily displaced Swiss students and mercenaries. From the outset, nostalgia was closely paired with homesickness, largely due to Hofer’s thesis gaining popularity in the discursive landscapes of the 18th century. Nostalgia was examined through the lens of medical sickness leading mostly to pathological overview: anatomical, physiological and mental theories. Whether inspired by the observation of displaced French and Swiss soldiers under the service of European monarchs, Swiss students, displaced housemaids, or workers, the pathological view started in the 17th and persisted throughout the 19th century.

Boym states that by the end of the 20th century “[a] provincial ailment, *maladie du pays*, turned into a disease of the modern age, *mal du siècle*” (*The Future* 7). Boym’s

argument is that nostalgia is not only caused by dislocation in space but also to changing conception of time. In modern times, the displaced individuals or immigrants in particular do not long to recover a lost place, but rather a lost moment in time. According to Boym, “The disease of this millennium will be called chronophobia or speedomania, and its treatment will be embarrassingly old-fashioned – [Nostalgia] (8). Moreover, the changing dynamics of our era is precisely about vanishing the present that appears as a critical reaction to a rapid scale of modernization, displacement and progressive change. From this collage emerges a contemporary cure to what ails the displaced individuals –nostalgia.

Boym’s argumentation about the nature of longing is highly relevant to the Caribbean diasporic literary production. According to Boym, the object of longing is “not a virtual space”, but “rather a social context that one could export into diaspora” (12). In this regard, diaspora and nostalgia are phenomena with a common denominator. Diaspora foreshadows displacement and nostalgia embraces it as a prime factor and nurtures the memories of dislocated individuals. In diaspora the rupture becomes a desire to recover a lost place, or rather a lost moment in time from the mainland perspective. It is precisely the heritage of the culture and the conscience for the place of origin and in the place of residence that encourages Latino/a writers to document stories of their homelands (Butler 2001). The recollection promotes a sentimental desire for a community with a collective memory. Cultivated memories of homeland invite subjects to contemplate them through available pictorial symbols, customs on an individual or collective levels. Boym distinguishes Restorative and Reflexive types of nostalgia¹, but they are not absolute categories.

The modulation of nostalgia, alienation, and displacement are common threads among the Caribbean diasporic literature written by so-called 1.5 generation² and Latino/a authors: *How the García Sisters Lost their Accent* (Álvarez 1992), *Dreaming in Cuban* (García 1993), *Soledad* (Cruz 2001), and *Kissing the Mango Tree* (Rivera

¹ Boym’s typology rests in the basic components -nostos and -algia. Restorative notion dwells in –nostos, the return to the original state. It attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, before it was altered by history. It is a project about heritage, homeland and invented traditions that aim to give a coherent version of lost home. Reflective nostalgia is marked by –algia, the painful longing and reflection, and has elements of melancholia. The reflexive nostalgia is a venture of heightened awareness of what one remembers about homeland and carries to the mainland, it is connected therefore to collective frames of memory.

² The 1.5 generation immigrant refers to those individuals who were born in one country but came as children or adolescent to the United States or other countries. This term is discussed in detail in Pérez Firmat’s memoirs *Next Year in Cuba* (1995) and the *Life on The Hyphen* (1994)

2002), *Exiled Memories* (Medina 1990), *Next year in Cuba* (Pérez-Firmat) as well as in Díaz's *Drown* and *BWLOW*. At the same time, the literary (diasporic) production of Caribbean is marked by historical and political events.

In this vein, Boym affirms that nostalgia's port of entry on the collective level is closely related to "The historical point when the conception of time and history were undergoing radical change" (8). In this regard, the Caribbean diasporic experience depicted in works of Esmeralda Santiago or Pérez Firmat and Junot Díaz who came in the 1960-1970s, is marked by political upheavals: Cuban Revolution³ and failed Bay of Pigs invasion (1961) in Cuba, the Great Migration and Operation Bootstrap⁴ in Puerto Rico, and the dictatorships of Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961) in The Dominican Republic. Each of these occurrences was followed by massive immigration to the United States as well as framed projections of longing. This is where globalization and the accelerated pace of modern life have deepened nostalgic recollections.

As diasporic literature emerges in the contemporary times this debate is amplified. The writing of self appears in-between spaces and places born from the ambivalence inspired by shifting borders, languages, identities and geographies. The immigration experience described both memoir and novel factor a significant degree of nostalgia into the narrative on both personal and collective levels (Pawelek 2015). The tradition of self-writing appears in-between and across socio-cultural spaces. The displaced authors are motivated by changeable boundaries and inevitable shifts in continuities and discontinuities, historical and political circumstances that factor nostalgia as an inseparable byproduct in the society of residence. Their stories resurface in the diaspora calling into question the mental baggage: landscapes of memory, history, traditions and symbols. As a result, these junctures have to be theorized.

³ Cuban exiles came to the U.S. in vast numbers as a result of The Cuban Revolution (1959) and various political upheavals dating back to the mid-19th century. The failed operation Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961) encouraged 135,000 Cubans flee Cuba and to settle in Miami. By the mid-1960s there were 210,000 Cubans in Miami, and by the 1980s that number reached two-thirds of a million (*Next Year* 58). Dade County, which contains Miami, lists the population of Cubans as 564,000 by 1990, which accounts for 53 percent of the total U.S Cuban population at that time (*Demographic Profile*, 14). Miami embraces a vast population of 700,000 Cubans who have arrived between 1959 -1996 and this process is ongoing (*From Welcomed to Exiles* 1996).

⁴ The period from 1946 through 1964 is known as the Great Migration from Puerto Rico to the United States. In the 1950s-1960s timeframe, the Operation Bootstrap extended beyond the island an average of 45,000 Puerto Ricans per year left the island and settled mainly in New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois and Massachusetts (Rodriguez 6).

Suman Gupta in *Globalization and Literature* (2008) indicates that the intersections within the “ken of literature and globalization” have to be conceptualized in regard to the pressing subjects (81). In her argument, globalization accounts for a transcendent entity that affects a wide range of human life and its junctures to be explored with reference to literary theory and literature. This frame provides an opportunity to explore the changing viewpoints on nostalgia as a response to political and historical events, and the diasporic movements of individuals from the Caribbean islands to the metropolitan areas of the United States. Similarly, the phenomenon of nostalgia can be regarded as an influential factor that shapes socio-cultural boundaries and impacts the formation of Latino/a identity.

Díaz’s current literary production – *Drown* (1997), *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and *This is how You Lose Her* (2012) – molds the contemporary reading which factors biography, fiction and postmodern nostalgia into the contexts of return to homeland. In addition, the narrative incorporates a yearning for an idealized and fictionalized past, and a longing for the lost and the unknown. In short, all three works incorporate autobiographical elements molded after the author’s migratory experience from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey (“In Darkness” 2008, “Slate” 2007). *Drown* is dominated by decaying rural boundaries in Boca Chica, the barrios of Santo Domingo, as well as in the hostile slums of New Jersey – the path followed by Díaz himself. The places where he grew up became building blocks of his narrative, while his higher education and his vocation as a writer became his arena. Díaz funnels these issues through the voice of Dominican-American youth. He is transmitting political agendas, not solely interrupting the colonial oppression. Instead, he promotes decolonialization while maintaining a cohort of brilliant stories.

Instead of creating a memoir with a singular voice, Díaz’s narrative point of view in *Drown* establishes a blurry distance between its innovative author, the text, the characters, and their experiences. The narrative articulates a wide array of people’s experiences, proffering a figurative truth about the urban authenticity of New Jersey’s inner spaces and Dominican barrios. In some ways, it mirrors the Nuyorican literature of the 1960s – in particular, Thomas Piri’s *Down Those Mean Streets* (1967) – reminding the modern reader of themes and motifs in *Drown*. Furthermore, these features are apparent in the novel, *BWLOW*. Díaz retrofits the despair and anguish of Dominican culture into the American experience in a similar fashion that Piri factored the deprecation of Puerto Rican culture into the community of Spanish Harlem during the 1960s. Since Díaz’s debut of his short stories in *Drown* (1997), the audience waited over ten years for his first novel.

BWLOW won the Sargent First Novel Prize, the National Book Critics Award, and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2008.

One of the elements that makes *BWLOW* fascinating is that it uses many of the formal features of master narratives and metanarratives. By virtue, it reminds the modern reader of the historiographic metafiction by Carlo Fuentes (*La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* 1962) that include a mixture of genres and the undercurrent of magical realism of García Marquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967), in which all people are predetermined by their pasts to endure misfortune. Díaz's novel follows a multigenerational storyline that stretches across decades of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) and Alejo Carpentier's soul searching voyage back to the source of colonization in *Viaje a la semilla* (1944:2003). Accordingly, Díaz's first novel has been approached from a variety of subjects and disciplines, ranging from: gender and sexuality studies (Villaes 2009), masculinity and sexuality (Sáez 2011), marginalization and intertextuality (O'Brien 2012), transnationality and magical realism (López-Calvo 2009). Other critics viewed Díaz's novel as an intertextual reading of Trujillo's dictatorial power in *La fiesta del chivo* (Figuerola 2014) and radical bilingualism (Casielles-Suárez 2013; Derrick 2015). Nonetheless, the theme of nostalgia remains relatively unexplored.

Díaz in *BWLOW* does not present a simple interpretation of history, nationality, culture and identity. Instead, all events progress towards and end with the fictional character, Oscar who embodies poli-culture, plurality of history, and nationalities. Paravisini-Gebet suggests that "Díaz's narrative space...is not dominated by nostalgic recreations of idealized childhood landscapes, but by the bleak, barren, and decayed margins of New Jersey's inner cities" ("Revisiting" 164). On the contrary, I argue that nostalgia emerges from these deteriorating city spaces. The major part of the plot unfolds in 1980s and 1990s New Jersey, weaves back to the colonial period, moves to the dictatorial era of Trujillo, and culminates in the contemporary barrios of the Dominican Republic. Thus, Díaz molds the contemporary reading that factors biography, fiction and neo-colonial nostalgia into the contexts of return to fatherland that emerges from the contemporary U.S. barrio perspective.

In the spirit of postmodernism *BWLOW* incorporates the dislocation of perspective and discourses, a collage of genres, and a variety of non-linear structures in favor of bringing forth the history, culture, identity and nationality of a particular community. The novel portrays the culturally specific communities of Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, and Paterson, New Jersey while simultaneously

transitioning between the island and mainland. Díaz's novel progresses via its incorporations of science fiction magazines, role-playing games, and diverse manifestations of styles, genres and unquoted Spanish and Afro-Spanish language. By the same token, the notion of nostalgia is fueled by progress, American-Caribbean history, science fiction magazines and pop culture each of which play a crucial role in Díaz's exploration of Latino identity, culture and belonging. Since Díaz's novel reaches deep into the backbone of American colonial history, the reader encounters on the first pages a retroactive colonial representation of longing.

Derrick Walcott's excerpt of "The Shoener Flight" opens the novel and places the contemporary reader in a colonial spirit:

*I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
a rusty sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patios for
any red nigger, and I, Sabine saw
when these slums of empire was paradise,
I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound of colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English
and either I'm nobody or I'm a nation*

Shabine's perspective unlocks the dialectics of the initial migratory experience of the Caribbean. Like Odysseus, he is a nomad or nobody without a proper name. Shabine's voyage begins once the sailor leaves the port. In retrospect, He reflects on his life only to find the old paradise lying in the ruins of the emerging empire. His reflective view alludes to colonial nostalgia –juxtaposed with an imperial counterpart that destroys the paradise. This leap approaches the period predating the European colonization, while progressively viewing the abrupt unwelcomed change inspired by modernity. Additionally, Walcott's epigraph establishes a connection between the migratory experience of the Caribbean national within the context of cultural *mestizaje*, or hybridity. This phenomenon is regarded as an outcome of European colonization by the Dutch, French, and English, and the enslavement of Africans.

The final words of the poem address the character in diaspora as "nobody" or "a nation." The binary creates opposite forces between diasporic subject and the nation. *BWLOW* embodies oppression of institutional violence and ideology of dictatorship, exclusion and inclusion of subjects in these communities. The novel is

clearly a transnational text that factors these variables into the storyline of the protagonist, Oscar. He emerges as a diasporic figure, who in a neo-colonial spirit embodies the burden passed down by Shabine. Shabine is a product of complex history and *mestizaje*. He carries the weight given by the past and then leaves it for the future generation. In contemporary times, Oscar inherits Shabine's quest for longing and belonging that equally emerges from his own diasporic experience. Díaz's novel connects the themes of nostalgia, utopia and escapism through the protagonist Oscar, his obsession with pop culture, science fiction magazines, and to certain extent with his mother Beli.

Nonetheless, Beli's coming-of-age story predates the great Dominican diaspora. Before there was the American Dream, before Paterson New Jersey, before Oscar and Lola were born, there was Hypatía Belicia Cabral (Beli), "[s]he lived in those days in Baní. Not the frenzied Baní of right now, supported by an endless supply of DoYos who've laid claim to most of Boston, Providence, New Hampshire. This was the Baní of time past, beautiful, and respectful" (*Wondrous* 77-78). In this passage, one encounters a subjective, unexamined state, a "simple nostalgia," which in Davis's view denotes a state of "healthier, more civilized, more exciting [past]" (*Yearning* 18). This transparent note of longing establishes distance and dialogues between the present, the unattractive Baní and one of those beautiful days. In this manner, Díaz, foreshadows the diasporic distance and temporal displacement. Rapid shifts and changes that take place in modern cities intensify the degree of sentimental recollection while the old ones are removed from this disdain.

During those early days that predated the flood of Dominicans (DoYos) into New York, Belicia's childhood enjoyed a peaceful time filled with relative tranquility, and love under the protective wing of her aunt. La Inca during that time was persistently recounting the Cabral family's glorious past: "These were the Beautiful Days. When La Inca would recount for Beli her family's illustrious history ... (Your father! Your mother! Your sisters! Your house!) ... in those nostalgic Trujillo days stickup kids were nowhere to be seen and beautiful bands did play" (*Wondrous* 78). Those beautiful nostalgic days overshadow the horrors and violence sparked by the dictatorship. La Inca repetitively praises the memories of her family's illustrious history emphasizing their wealth, status, and unconditional love as she hoped to influence Beli's future. As a result, nostalgia resurfaces as a rhetorical tool aiming to awake Beli's deeper consciousness and her wealthy heritage. Yet, young Beli did not care for the past. She fostered her own sense of direction: "[h]er feet pointed forward, she reminded La Inca over and over. Pointed to the future" (81). Beli's

longing had not been directed towards her royal family or lofty mansions and her upper class background, but rather it has always been directed elsewhere.

As noted in the text, “Everything about her present life irked her; she wanted, with all her heart, something else [...]” (79: without my emphasis). This discontent clearly permeates Beli’s life and forms an inseparable part of her existence. This rhetoric, however, requires theoretical interpretations. Boym’s *Future of Nostalgia* provides a convenient field, an innovative insight regarding the forthcoming nature of longing. Boym notes, “[n]ostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). Boym’s line aptly describes Belicia’s life longings for somewhere or something else.

In a postmodern sense, the choice of anticipated directions is not necessarily guided toward the past, but on the contrary, to the future. This condition can be classified as the divergent form of nostalgia, known as *Sehnsucht*. This German notion describes the emotionally intense state of “craving” that etymologically derives from two nouns: *die Sehnen* “yearning” and *die Sucht*, “addiction.” This term denotes a broad spectrum of thoughts regarding all aspects of life viewed as uncompleted or imperfect. This deep feeling can be equally accompanied by negative and positive emotional states or feelings. In this regard, *Sehnsucht* denotes an off-modern version of nostalgia, a divergent image of longing for the future. Scheibe et al. (2007) explores the psychology of *Sehnsucht*, or life longings, and identifies six main characteristics among which “utopian conceptions of ideal development,” “sense of incompleteness and imperfection of life,” and “conjoint time focus on the past, present, and future” are each equally relevant to Beli’s experience (“Psychology of *Sehnsucht*” 780). Thusly, key features of *Sehnsucht* may validate Beli’s unsatisfactory state and her escapist ambitions. The prospective dimensions of longing for something else follows her in life and also inclines Beli towards misfortunes.

A key reference appears at the opening in the opening of chapter three, in the initial description: “[T]here was their mother Hypatía Belicia, ...who like yet to be born [children] would come to exhibit Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for *elsewheres*” (77: with my emphasis, sic). This quotation illustrates two substantial points: nostalgia achieving a forthcoming dimension, and defying anew her homeland as an inevitable departure point. Moreover, the aspiration for elsewhere dialogues with larger structures and yields a double meaning. It was a potent wish, but unachievable for Dominicans living under Trujillo’s dictatorship, because his

impenetrable *Plátano Curtain*⁵ sheltered the world from the outside in and from the inside out.

Therefore, “longing for elsewhere” becomes a metaphor for collective yearning, for freedom, or a “wishful thinking,” a desire to escape the island that stands as “Alcatraz of the Antilles” under “the ruling of Leonidas Trujillo Molina” (80). This reference is amplified by a plurality of voices crushed under the regime, “[t]he generation that despite the consensus declared change impossible hankered for change all the same” (81: without my emphasis). In this fashion, longing is interrelated to a larger structure and shared memory. In Boym’s view, nostalgia is about the connection between biography of the individual and the biography of groups and nations, between individual and collective memory (*The Future* xvi). Consequently, the notion of collective longing always exists in an inseparable relationship across individual and communal spaces of memory. In particular, longing in the Dominican Republic under the ruling of Trujillo is directed towards freedom and social mobility on domestic and global scales that appears as a wishful thinking. Here one recognizes a tense mixture of history and longing. In their work, *The Imagine Past* (1989), Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw provide an poignant perspective on the role of nostalgia and history: “Of all the ways of using history, nostalgia is the most general, looks the most innocent, and is perhaps the most dangerous” (*The Imagined Past* 1). Within this context, Díaz’s mixture of politics, history and nostalgia crafts a disfigured reminiscence of homeland, where the terrors of dictatorial regime are softened by a note of longing that also resurfaces in diaspora.

Belicia’s inextinguishable ailment is inherited by her yet-to-be-born children: Oscar and Lola, who grew up without a father in the U.S. and experience the solitude of diaspora. Oscar de León is a non-typical Latino character in a modernistic sense. His coming-of-age story unfolds in the 1970’s in Paterson, New Jersey. Childhood “was truly a Golden Age for Oscar” because as a young Casanova he had “his first and only ménage a trios” (13). His luck with women is brief and short like the story of his life, hence, the allusion to “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber” by Ernest Hemingway. His life goes downhill and the reader finds Oscar converted into a hardcore sci-fi nerd who weighs whopping 245 to 260 pounds. The protagonist is a

⁵ “Plátano Curtain” refers to the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti “that exists beyond maps that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of the people” (Wondrous 224-225). This ideology refers mostly to racial discrimination against blackness, mostly targeting Haitian citizens in the Dominican Republic, but also includes Afro-Dominicans that are particularly dark-skinned. The secondary connotation implies the impossibility of leaving the island unnoted by the Trujillo system.

marginalized figure on many levels. He is a born in New Jersey, obese and nerdy male of Afro-Dominican descent. Oscar is unable to counter the machismo that is expected in the Latino stereotypical environment. He lacks “Atomic level G[ame]” and is unable to pick up girls like a “typical Dominican Cat” (20). Thus, Oscar’s burden is his inability to stand up to Dominican cultural expectations. Furthermore, Oscar’s malicious schoolboy nickname, “Oscar Wao,” is a stark and hurtful reference to the overweight and homosexual British 19th century novelist, Oscar Wilde.

His voyage on the verge of modernity parallels a superhero quest also associated with Oscar’s outsider status as a nerd and Shabine as an outcast. A major part of the storyline unfolds under the Ronald Reagan era, placing a value not only to the traditional canon of literature, but also to the old-fashioned sci-fi magazines and role-playing game community of the 1980s and 1990s in which the author grew up. In the 1980s, the nationwide growing popularity of the *Dungeon and Dragon* role-playing games was marked by biased reception from the public. It was cherished by the teenaged nerds while it was dispraised by parents’ panic and linked with Satanism by the church (“Dragons Panic” 2014; *The Fantasy* 2000). Díaz’s popular culture references set a metaphor of longing for days past with a modern twist. From the urban jungle of New Jersey inner spaces emerges the Latino ghetto nerd!

References to popular culture form a complementary currency of globalization. As both a structure of feeling and a form of enactment, nostalgia prosecutes a critique of modernity that extends beyond the imaginary. In other words, a structure of feeling grows into the realm of practice and action. Oscar’s fiasco to meet the cultural expectations of both the Dominican and American cultures makes him an outsider to both cultures. Consequently, he awakens an alternative identity via escapism in the realm of science fiction literature and American pop culture. Oscar could “write in Elvish,” and he could speak the invented language from Frenk Herbert’s *Dune* (1965) – “Chakobsa [and] could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic” (21). Oscar’s acute nerdiness is accompanied by his eternal quest: an adolescent desire to find love. But he simply does not possess the necessary qualities expected of a stereotypical Dominican at that time.

In a postmodern sense, Oscar’s desire for the unknown puts his mind elsewhere. He seeks refuge. He seeks the comfort zone that he lacked in New Jersey. Geoffrey Lord evaluates the role of history and culture in shaping the belonging in *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference* (1995). In this critical work he writes: “American

culture, persistently present minded, remains future-oriented and markedly obsessed with the idea of breaking with the past to found something new” (102). This line of thought articulates Oscar’s desire to voice his difference and it explains the process of his becoming a geek. To escape from his failures and his platonic crushes, he pictures a futuristic utopia, where nerds like him are protagonists with supernatural powers who save the world and win the affections of the girls: “In his [day]dreams he was either saving them [girls] from aliens or he was returning to the neighborhood, rich and famous –It’s him! The Dominican Stephen King! ... or plátano Doc Savage” (27). The science fiction references to a non-human world account for Oscar’s countercultural practice, where he crafts a comfortable universe and fits in.

However, in real life his nerdiness cannot be hidden. To display this line of thought Yunior provides a footnote directed at the reader to voice Oscar’s otherness: “You really want to know what being a X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mía! Like having bat wings or pair of tentacles growing out your chest” (22). Díaz criticizes the stereotyping and cultural discrimination that perpetuates a negative attitude toward people of color. Nonetheless, from this context a new cultural identity emerges: the Latino ghetto nerd. The science fiction and pop culture genres allow him to escape into a completely different domain, where outsiders are true heroes. These references shape the cultural context and become a constant alluding to his diasporic experience, family and Dominican history. Each time he moves back to reality, he encounters doubt, vagueness, and insecurity.

According to Guarnizo, Dominicans born in the U.S. “have become a group whose territory is a borderless, transnational space. They are here and there and in between... they are perceived as foreigners in both locations” (“Binational Society” 166). In a similar manner, Oscar’s life lurches between the Dominican Republic, the United States, and the sci-fi world. Thusly, the protagonist’s trajectory and development are framed in the novel as a whole. Nonetheless, nowhere he is rooted firmly. After all, although he was born in the U.S., the footnote of the text indicates that he was “living in DR [Dominican Republic] for the first couple years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey” (19). Because of Oscar’s diasporic experience, he is located here and elsewhere; he exists across and in-between spaces; nor is he fully American or Dominican. Most importantly, he is all too aware he fits nowhere. One may ask the question: What does nostalgia have to do with any of this?

Fred Davis, the eminent sociologist suggested in *Yearning for Yesterday* (1978) that nostalgia is “the search for continuity amidst heats of discontinuity” (35). Davis perceives the disconnecting elements as building blocks that an individual needs to reassemble and accept oneself on the verge of change. In his view, nostalgia accounts for a stimulating part of our inner self. It is “a psychological lens” that individuals employ in their never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities (*Yearning* 31). Hence, in evaluating the use of nostalgia, one cannot ignore the context in which it operates and liberates itself.

Oscar repeatedly finds refuge within the realm of Western Popular Culture (role-playing games, sci-fi comic books and TV-series of the 1970s, and 1980s). One day he envisions his distant future and “[s]aw himself at the Game Room, picking through the miniatures for the rest of his life. He didn’t want this future but couldn’t see how it could be avoided, couldn’t figure out his way out. Fukú. Darkness” (268). This passage marks a decisive moment in his life, a rupture with his own way of perceiving his existence. Instead of sidetracking from the reality, the narrator depicts Oscar as the object of his own observation. His fate seems predetermined by powers of fukú or darkness that liberates his pursuit of a reconciliation with a productive change.

Moreover, a transformation takes place in Oscar once the new generation of games and gamers emerges in the mid-1980s: “overnight the new generation of nerds weren’t buying role-playing games anymore. They were obsessed with Magic Cards! [...] his Age was coming to a close. When the latest nerdery was no longer compelling, when you preferred the old to new” (270). Thusly, the sudden disappearance of cultural artifacts renders consequences for Oscar, the Latino nerd. The new nerd milieu signals a significant note of longing for the past and highlights the allure of the old genre of games and Oscar’s faithfulness to it. Oscar, instead of lamenting the nostalgic fixation with the past, breaks with the habit and decides to rediscover his roots by visiting his motherland. Within this context Díaz portrays the mechanics of Dominican Diaspora.

As noted in the text: “Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children [...] Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation: Back home, everybody! Back home!” (271). This quote articulates a substantial overflow of masses and capital directed from the mainland towards their country of origin. Annesley in *Fictions of Globalization* (2006) argues that globalization disputes befit “the connections of that tie ethnicity and consumption together” (8). Diaspora and globalization factor nostalgia into the

contexts of return, yearning for the place, and a desire to articulate the wealth of Dominican Yorkers upon their repetitive returns to their fatherland. This view generates a stark contrast with what Beli experienced as a child in 1960s (as described previously). From Boym's perspective, nostalgia is a deep societal and cultural condition, a syndrome caused by accelerated times, in which the subjects tend to revisit their native land and hope to find a temporal relief from fast-tracked life. In this sense, return home fosters nostalgia for motherland as a retrospective vitality that brings forth a critique of modernity embedded in place and time.

Challenging the urban spaces, Boym uses the spatial metaphor of porosity to validate how time and history in the city are embedded in the civic milieu. Porosity from geology is a void that over time collects debris. The city structures in a similar manner accumulate layers with cultural, social, political and historical value within its landmarks and monuments. Modernity and reminiscence create laments and concerns. However, the loss of a better past and the tender memory reside in a circumscribed place and time such of the "Baní of time past beautiful and respectful...city famed for resistance to blackness" (77). A constructive picture of an idealized past resurfaces in the light of present while the Haitian presence remains disconnected from those days. The Dominican Republic of Belicia's childhood differs from the one she and Oscar encounter in the 1990s.

The setting becomes even more abrupt indulging progress and globalization:

Santo Domingo was the place that crumbled with crippled concrete shells come to die-and the hunger on some of the kids' faces, can't forget that-but also it seemed in many places like a whole new country was materializing atop of ruins of the old one: there were now better roads and nicer vehicles and brand new luxury air-conditioned buses playing the longer routes to the Cibao and beyond and U.S. fast-food restaurants (Dunkin Donuts and Burger King) and local ones [...]. (273)

The reconstruction of Santo Domingo brings forth a disfigured image of the capital by reflecting both the urban broken facet and paved expression of poverty on the faces of starving children. An image followed by what Boym calls changes in "porosity," which manifest themselves in cities in transition (*The Future* 76). Consequently, the paragraph reveals "a whole new country was materializing atop of ruins of the old one." Nostalgia shifts between stability and discontinuity lending a fertile ground for longing to flourish. In this way, a new urban space emerges atop the ruins of an old post-colonial world. Both merging and reemerging generate a

juxtaposed collection of space, time and memory that are embedded in place and time, and molded by modernity. To paraphrase Boym, the city becomes the ideal crossroad between freedom and modernity, nostalgia and innovation (The Future 76). A quintessential space of cultural memory appears. Old ruins are erased by modernity, such that they then form a crossroad between time and overtaken space. The inevitable flipside of the coin of modernity captures spaces in transition. And the passing of time is the response to the loss of spatial boundaries and social borders.

Global forces such as capitalist reconstructions, including the influence of imperialism imposed by the United States, reshape the old Dominican Republic. Thus, from a neo-colonial nostalgia emerges a world born from the aches of modernity and progress. The U.S. corporate powers mark its existence within the third world country imposing monuments: Dunkin Donuts and Burger King. Progress fosters a bricolage of two spaces, and a new and modern one emerges on top of the colonial ruins of the Dominican Republic, which includes the culturally diverse Haitian world. Within the margins of the city one encounters poverty and chains of fast foods restaurants.

Consequently, the novel retrofits the old Baní of the mid-1950s in the earlier chapter of Belicia's coming-of-age story, while the third chapter offers a contrasting snapshot of the Dominican Republic undergoing institutional and cultural transformation in the 1990s. The divergent picture of the current country responds to the yearning for a time with a slower pace, and with less cultural diversity in Santo Domingo. But instead, the reader encounters gradual transformation, which brings the reading to Oscar's viewpoint on this matter.

Once Oscar's view shifts from the city center to its outskirts, the poverty, modernity and marginalization create a collage of juxtaposed images, as noted in the text:

[I]n La Capital –the guaguas, the cops, the mind-boggling poverty, the Dunkin Donuts, the beggars, the Haitian selling roasted peanuts..., the mind-blowing poverty, the snarls of streets and rusting zinc shacks that were there the barrios populares, the masses of niggers he waded through every day...the new tunnels driving into bauxite earth, the signs that banned donkey carts. (277)

A mixture of American imperialism abruptly shifts to the outskirts of Santo Domingo. The old fashioned shack-houses with zinc roofs, the noise, the streets

packed with busses, the abandoned donkey carts, the mind-blowing poverty, and the dark skinned Haitians are a constant in these shantytowns. In fact, there are many similarities between Dominicans and Haitians as Hispaniola is by American standards 95% black. The old ruins intercept the image of time and history embodying a primordial space of nostalgia. The porosity holds its value in accumulated space over time and those who visited the Dominican Republic at least three times in the past decade, are aware of how this new space materializes on top of the old ruins. In Díaz's novel, the margins of both the old and new world are crushed and redefined by an urban image of the city and its barrios. This changing ethnographic landscape of nostalgia is shaped by cultural struggles and concerns that arise from spatial context and social boundaries linked to commonality and continuity. At the same time, this perplexing image emphasizes distance and disjuncture leading to a critique of modernity as a way to frame the unattractive present.

The reader encounters a parallel image in Derek Walcott's "Shooner Flight," where the sailor, Shabine, encounters an old paradise lying in the ruins of the emerging empire. In a similar fashion, Oscar inherits Shabine's legacy. The sailor is also a product of history and colonization and passes the weight of the past onto the future generation. Centuries later Oscar, confronts the old world under the new neo-imperial powers of the modern age, facing contemporary slums and neo-colonial nostalgia. From the arrival of Columbus to present times, colonialism and imperialism have paved over the New World's violent and uneven social, cultural and economic systems. The old ruins and new spaces intercept the image of time, history and modernity, and from the margins thereof nostalgia resurfaces.

In sum, Díaz connects the themes of nostalgia, utopia and escapism through Oscar and his mother, Beli. These themes are interlinked through intense yearning and dissatisfaction with the time and place, yet they differ. In Beli's story, one encounters a nostalgia that is directed towards an idealized and fictionalized past, *Sehnsucht*, or escapism working in terms of space, rather than time. Oscar's longing is going somewhere else, toward an imagined and utopian future. And this escapism is found in his fictionalized universe. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does not present a simple interpretation of history, nationality, and culture. Instead, all events channel towards and end with the fictional character, Oscar, who embodies poli-culture, plurality of history and nationalities. The prevailing sci-fi lens of the story pays homage to nerd nostalgia, allocating Oscar in the modern and progressively unequal world on both sides of the American and Dominican border. The protagonist, as a diasporic subject, in of neo-colonial spirit, inherits the weight

of the past passed to him by Shabine and faces estrangement, longing and modernity. At the same time, the mixture of longing politics and history provides an intense image of 1960s homeland that is softened by nostalgia and disfigured by the ruling of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina.

Although nostalgia made its debut in Romanticism, with the temporal emotion to grasp fleeing human life, love and lost objects; in a modern fast-progressing world, it forms an inseparable chunk of human existence. Nostalgia, in this fashion, forms a part of “social theatricality that turned everyday life into art, even if it wasn’t a masterpiece” (*The Future* 16). In the same manner, Díaz’s novel can be read as an extension of days passed. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is instilled with a diversity of supernatural features that derived from a wide range of science fiction films or Marvel Comic books or novels that create a nostalgic universe of their own. This universe is mapped after sci-fi and fantasy worlds and calls on the memory of the 1980s and 1990s generations. This longing speaks to those individuals who can identify with vintage Marvel Comics and with the enigmatic society of role-playing games. It may well be the only readers who are able to fully comprehend the novel’s universe are Latino nerds and the author himself.

The literary discourse negotiates the distance that mirrors the dualities of the diaspora where its author depicts the change imposed by time and modernization. The shifting setting of both New Jersey and the Dominican Republic are amplified by the correlation of its lasting history. The novel, through the usage of sci-fi references from comic books and movies, attempts to instill the history of the Dominican diaspora within both national histories (in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic), while it factors the civic experience of national subjects into the story. Díaz is writing about people like himself who move between the island and mainland and confront the diaspora and the world of those who read science fiction. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* crafts a unique space of its own that exists within the realm of comic books and science fiction, popular culture, Spanish, Dominican Spanish, African-American English, modernity, and a fascination with the old urban spaces. From this collage of genres and references emerges the author’s voice that articulates reminiscence that is not intoxicating, but rather sobering.

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