

Asian Latino Conflict and Solidarity in Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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**Paula C. Park,**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Asian Latino Conflict and Solidarity in Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" Paula C. Park responds to the recent interest in Asian Latino/a culture by examining the role of Chinese Dominicans in Junot Díaz's acclaimed novel. She first places her analysis within the historical context of Chinese immigration in the Dominican Republic during the first half of the twentieth century. Then, following the migration route of Díaz's characters, Park extends her discussions on interracial conflict and solidarity to the United States. Her argument is that Díaz's fiction avoids falling into a multiculturalist framework by genuinely portraying the potential alliances between racial minorities, while not overlooking the persistent tensions between them.

**Paula C. PARK**

**Asian Latino Conflict and Solidarity in Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

As of late, contact between Asians and Latin Americans received much attention. There has been a boom of monographs about Asian diasporic experiences or the fascination with Asian culture throughout Latin America. The focus of these studies ranges from the Chinese coolie trade in Cuba and Peru in the nineteenth century and Orientalist tendencies in *modernista* writers at the turn of the century to the various processes of transculturation in modern day Latin America (see, e.g., Chao Romero; Camayd-Freixas; Hirabayashi and Hu-DeHart; Lesser; López-Calvo; Su; Tinajero). The encounter between Asian and Hispanic people and cultures has bridged different academic disciplines while also reaching larger audiences. For example, in the summer of 2013 the Smithsonian Institute held an exhibition that showcased Asian Latino/a collaborations and cultural productions in the United States. It featured artists of diverse Asian Hispanic heritage, fusion foods such as Asian tacos, and photographic documentation of Mexican workers protesting alongside Filipino/a immigrants. This event, co-organized by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and the Smithsonian Latino Center, had a celebratory name: "Intersections as American Life: Smithsonian Asian-Latino Festival."

Further, the encounter between Asian Americans and U.S. Latino(a)s has brought visibility to a new cross-cultural group: "Asian Latino(a)s." Robert Chao Romero and Kevin Escudero estimate that there are around three hundred thousand Asian Latino(a)s living in the United States. Chao Romero and Escudero categorize Asian Latino(a)s into four groups: the descendants of Puerto Rican immigrant laborers who went to Hawaii during the late nineteenth century and intermarried with Native Hawaiians, Filipinos who worked together with Mexican immigrants in the agricultural fields in the twentieth century, people born in the United States with cross-cultural Asian Latino parentage, and Asian immigrants from Latin America who have resettled throughout the United States (2). Indeed, the need to prove that people of Asian and Hispanic descent or cultural background have long been in contact throughout the Americas has been fulfilled. Beyond the objective of receiving public recognition, scholars will have to confront and dismantle allegations which may consider this cross-cultural encounter an exotic object of study—a commodity that propels the all-inclusive discourse of multiculturalism. Along those lines, through a close reading of Junot Díaz's 2007 novel, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I challenge the festive attitude so often perceived in approaches to interracial encounters. If critics and scholars of Díaz's fiction advanced dialogues about race and racism against or amongst Dominicans, what remains to be discussed is the lesser yet still significant role played by another group in Díaz's novel: the Chinese. Filling this void, I examine the role of the Chinese in the novel's third chapter entitled "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral." My analysis unravels the potential of interracial collaboration, as well as the deep-rooted racial hierarchies in the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Owing to its long and eloquent title *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (hereafter *Oscar Wao*), Díaz's novel is often summarized as being about Oscar de León, an overweight second-generation Dominican immigrant who attends Rutgers University and has always struggled to fit in. A more precise synthesis of the novel, however, certainly mentions the intertwined lives of characters who belong to three generations. Apart from Oscar, there is his sister Lola, Oscar's and Lola's mother Belicia Cabral, and their grandfather Abelard Cabral. Last but not least, there is Oscar's college roommate Yunior de las Casas, who is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel. Although the stories of these characters counterpoint each other through various recurring themes—such as *fukú*, the curse that runs through Oscar's family—each chapter can be read separately. Among them, nearing almost a hundred pages, "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral" is by far the longest chapter and it functions like a novel within the novel, a *Bildungsroman*. It is set in the second half of the 1950s during Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship and ends with the beginning of the massive migration of Dominicans to the United States after Trujillo's assassination in 1961. According to Juan Gonzalez, "between 1960 and 1986, more than 400,000 Dominicans migrated legally from the Dominican Republic to the United States, especially to New York and New Jersey, and many thousands more, illegally" (117).

Mocking the ready-made narrative of the Latino(a) immigrant's "American Dream," the chapter begins as follows: "Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola

like a dream, or the trumpets from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral: a girl so tall your bones ached just looking at her so dark it was as if the Creatix had, in her making, blinked who, like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewheres" (77). Throughout the chapter, Belicia's dark skin is reaffirmed continually revealing the racist context in which she was raised. After becoming an orphan, her family refuses to adopt her because of her blackness. Her father's cousin, La Inca, is the only one willing to take care of Belicia (nicknamed Beli) and thus takes her to the provincial city of Baní, a city "famed for its resistance to blackness" (78). The narrator then calls her "the darkest character in our story" and a "poor prieta" who has a "dark-skinned media-campesina ass" (78, 100, 82). Further emphasizing how the national anti-Black discourse produces internalized racism, Beli prefers to be called *india* rather than *morena* (115). This also indicates that unlike the United States' one-drop rule, in the Dominican Republic "one drop of European blood makes one white, or at least non black" (Chen 24).

When Beli turns thirteen, La Inca manages to enroll her in El Redentor, one of the most prestigious—or as put by the narrator, "whiteskinned" (84)—schools in Baní with a scholarship. Yet from the very first day Beli struggles to fit in: her blackness makes her invisible. She is "exiled beyond the bonewalls of the macroverse itself ... She wasn't even lucky enough to be demoted into that lamentable subset—those mega-losers that even the losers pick on. She was beyond that, in Sycorax territory" (84). The only person in whom Beli sees a potential friend is a Chinese immigrant girl named Wei. Functioning like an innovative element in the white student body, at first Wei had been in the realm of visibility, although a visibility which was far from qualifying as inclusion or tolerance: "students had scourged her with all the usual anti-Asian nonsense. They cracked on her hair (It's so greasy!), on her eyes (Can you really see through those?), on chopsticks (I got some twigs for you!), on language (variations on ching-chong-ese.) The boys especially loved to tug their faces back into bucked-tooth, chinky-eyed rictuses. Charming. Ha-ha. Jokes aplenty" (84). The racial discrimination towards Wei is no doubt distressing. However, Wei does not respond or even seem to react to the bullying and she handles this senseless harassment in silence. The narrator suggests that Wei's passivity is partly due to the fact that despite two years in school, she has not managed to dominate "more than a gloss of Spanish" (84). This is unlikely, but it indicates how at this time the Chinese were not well received in the Dominican Republic. Soon enough, Wei ceases to be the object of ridicule: "once the novelty wore off (she didn't ever respond), the students exiled Wei to the Phantom Zone, and even the cries of *China, China, China* died down eventually" (84; emphasis in the original). Hence, like Beli, Wei is demoted to the exilic condition of an outsider: Wei becomes invisible. The schoolchildren are incapable of seeing anything beyond a nameless Chinese girl and a nameless Black girl.

As Beli and Wei sit together in class, a chance of bonding arises: it is an ideal scenario for racial minorities to unite or at least keep each other company. Nevertheless, again hinting at the strong prejudice against blacks in the Dominican Republic, the silent Wei does not keep quiet about Beli's skin color: "You black," Wei says bluntly, "*Black-black*" (84). Wei seems to project the harassment she has undergone onto Beli. Presenting a competing racial hierarchy, however, La Inca disparages the Chinese. As Beli struggles with her grades at school, she is compared to Wei: "You would think, La Inca complained, that you could score higher than a china" (85). La Inca also reminds Beli that she comes from a highly educated class; she is the daughter of a doctor, a "world famous surgeon" (86). Further delineating a rigid class hierarchy, Beli looks down on Dorca, the daughter of La Inca's cleaning lady. Beli arrogantly boasts, although far from the truth, that she is popular at school, has a handsome white boyfriend and gets invited to luxurious parties that Dorca could never even dream about: "Dorca was so overwhelmed she spent the night in her house, inconsolable, crying and crying. Beli could hear her loud and clear" (98). In short, attitudes like these demonstrate that victims of segregation do not naturally have the instinct to form alliances, but quite often reproduce similar discriminatory conducts towards whoever is considered to be underneath them in the prevailing social hierarchy. In this respect, in an interview about his novel, Díaz said the following: "I think there are credible ironies in that even in communities that are ostracized by the larger, mainstream community there are people within these very communities who are ostracized for what seems to be completely arbitrary reasons ... I think part of what I was interested in as a writer was sort of exploring the internal tyranny of a community ... It's fascinating. What happens to a person when nobody lets you in?" (Díaz qtd. in

Ali <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/04/11/revenge-of-the-ghetto-nerd/>>). Although in this commentary Díaz was referring to the character of Oscar, the struggle to be accepted and included in a group is also relevant to Beli, who as a child desired to be part of and in fact partook in the oppressive community of predominantly white and rich Dominican children.

Social hierarchy becomes even more complicated with sexual appeal. Beli becomes an attractive and curvy woman—synthesized, comically, by her *pechonalidad* (93), a Spanish expression that combines playfully the words *pecho* (breasts) and *personalidad*. Without immediately realizing it, Beli becomes "visible," especially to the boys at school and older men in Baní. Thus, before she could display her "colossal cleavage" to Jack Pujols, a popular white boy Beli becomes obsessed with, Wei intervenes. Wei runs towards Beli, buttons her blouse up and yells "You showing!" (95). The scene, although succinct, indicates that some sort of relationship did after all develop between Wei and Beli. Nevertheless, this alleged friendship is never addressed again and Beli goes on with her mission to seduce Jack. They consummate their relationship and Beli is set to experience her first heartbreak. As the illicit interracial relationship is discovered, race and class privilege dictates that Jack is the victim and that Beli must be expelled from the school.

Before I continue with my analysis, here is a summary of the history of Chinese immigration to the Dominican Republic. In 1847 about 142,000 Chinese went to Cuba to work as indentured laborers. In the 1860s and 1870s, thousands of free Chinese arrived to Cuba, many from California, to work as merchants and craftsmen (see López 4). In the second half of the nineteenth century, some of these Chinese laborers in Cuba were sent to the Dominican Republic for temporal jobs, such as making bricks (see Chong <<http://noticias.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=168914&CtNode=1697>>). During the first decades of the twentieth century more Chinese migrated to the Dominican Republic, from New York, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. The census of the first half of the twentieth century indicates a slow demographic progression of Chinese immigrants. According to an official report, between 1916 and 1919, seventy-five Chinese migrated to work as cooks and domestic servants (see Castillo 173). In 1931, the Chinese ambassador in Cuba visited the Dominican Republic and developed a treaty that would ease the entry requirements for Chinese to the Dominican Republic (see Chen 26). Thereafter, 312 Chinese came in 1935 and 455 in 1950 (see Castillo). Nevertheless, unlike in Cuba, there was never a massive Chinese immigration to the Dominican Republic.

During the 1950s, Trujillo encouraged Chinese immigration to improve the Dominican Republic's economy and the diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (see Chen 26). The immigrants from this generation established laundry services, bakeries, and restaurants. Luis M. Chong explains that the popular Dominican saying "Eso lo saben hasta los chinos de Bonao" ("Even the Chinese from Bonao know that") originates from the fact that Trujillo and his clan would attend Chinese restaurants and the Chinese employees would listen to their conversations. In other words, for many years the Chinese were rumored to be Trujillo's confidants. Along these lines, in *Oscar Wao* Wei's father is said to be the owner of the largest *pulpería* (grocery store) in the country and is known "dubiously, as Trujillo's Chino" (84). By the second half of the twentieth century when Beli's childhood story is set, the Chinese would find themselves dedicated to other businesses such as supermarkets and hotels (see Castillo 174). Thus, alluding to the Chinese community's growing economic activities in the Dominican Republic, after being expelled from school Beli begins working as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant called Palacio Peking. Her bosses are the Chinese brothers Juan and José. Like Wei, although more credibly in this case, Juan struggles with the Spanish language. When Beli inquires about her salary, Juan replies in choppy phrases: "Salary! No salary! You a waitress, you tips" (104). At first the brothers are cold with Beli, yet they eventually develop a friendship and participate in a dynamic intercultural exchange. For example, Juan teaches Beli how to play dominoes, while José after getting to know her and building some trust, reproaches her for wasting her life away. Working at Palacio Peking, Beli would later remember, she "came of age" (105).

Beli's friendship with the brothers is interrupted, however, when she becomes romantically involved with an enigmatic and affluent middle-aged businessman known as the "Gangster." Again referring to the Chinese immigrants' economic diversification in the Dominican Republic, it is mentioned that they would meet in a motel in the capital that was "run by los chinos" (162). Owing to a change in attitude, Beli is fired from her job at Palacio Peking, but shortly after she is re-hired since the Gangster had the power to threaten the brothers. Thus, inserting another dimension of social privilege to

the story and preparing the reader for Beli's second heartbreak, it is revealed that the mysterious Gangster not only works for Trujillo, but that he is Trujillo's brother-in-law. Beli, who is pregnant, is not worried because she believes innocently that the Gangster will leave his wife for her. Instead of attaining her romantic dream, however, Beli is set to experience her second heartbreak. The Gangster's wife shows up with two officers in order to take care of the (family) business, that is, to abduct Beli for a forced abortion. Yet before she can be taken away, José comes to the rescue with the entire Palacio Peking crew. Risking their lives, they come armed with a machete and a pistol: "Listen, chino, you don't know exactly what you're doing" Juan is warned by one of the officers. Giving Beli the opportunity to escape, José cocks his pistol and responds for his brother, "This chino knows exactly what he's doing" (142).

After the dramatic scene, Beli never sees the brothers again. She is tortured by the officers and after some time she emigrates to the United States where she would have her heart broken for a third and last time, by Oscar's and Lola's father: "In later years Beli would lament that she had ever lost touch with her 'chinos' ... They were so good to me, she moaned to Oscar and Lola. Nothing like your worthless esponja of a father" (105). The brothers are compared unexpectedly to Oscar's and Lola's father and placed in the same category as the person who was supposed to be her life companion. Moreover, the brothers' friendship and sacrificial support is so crucial to her that the episode ends with Beli declaring nostalgically: "Mis chinos ... saved my life" (142). Referring to the brothers' rescue of Beli, Juanita Heredia claims that "different racial groups, even if marginalized, ally to help one another in a time of need" (214). Although right on target, Heredia's observation results in an idealized politics of interracial solidarity. The brothers are categorized discreetly as another "different" racial group when in fact, beyond functioning like foil characters, they are well developed and essential to Beli's formative years. Indeed, as the brothers' friendship with Beli is discontinued, the reader is left to imagine the punishment they would have received for confronting Trujillo's clan. However, a series of flashbacks present their survival and their life stories detached from their relationship with Beli. For example, indicating a previous Asian Latino-ness about them, it is revealed that before moving to the Dominican Republic, the brothers had spent part of their youth in the Philippines (129). Further qualifying the brothers as Asian Latinos—as defined by Chao Romero and Escudero—two earlier flash-forwards extend their migration route: they too, like Beli, emigrate to the United States. This move confirms that as put by Mu-Kien Adriana Sang, "Chinese migration to the Caribbean had a clear objective: to use it as a springboard to the Promised Land: the United States" (154; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). On the one hand, Juan immigrated to Skokie, Illinois, and formed a family there. As an aged man, he "would yell at his Americanized grandchildren in his guttural Spanish, and they laughed at him, thinking it Chinese" (105). On the other hand, José acquits himself by fighting in favor of the United States' second military occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and then moves to Atlanta, where he dies of cancer. As José agonized, he "[cried] out his wife's name, which the nurses confused for more Chinese gobbledygook—extra emphasis, in their minds, on the *gook*" (106). Although succeeding in reaching their final destination, the United States, even in their old age both brothers never quite fit in. The language they speak gives away their foreignness.

In a way, the brothers' intricate migration route reveals how Díaz's portrayal of the discrimination suffered by Asians and Afro-Dominicans in the Dominican Republic mirrors the interracial tensions in the United States. In 2001, Díaz and fellow Dominican authors Julia Álvarez and Loida Maritza Pérez engaged in a conversation about African Americans and Dominicans. In the interview, Álvarez claims that one of her early inspirations was James Weldon Johnson, while Díaz declares that his most "profound influence" was Toni Morrison and thus they hint at the cultural link between African Americans and Afro-Dominicans. Pérez says: "We share the blood of common ancestors. Language separates us, but our silence regarding our shared history also divides ... We should refuse to be so easily fragmented—even by the unfortunate judgments some of us make about each other" (Pérez qtd. in Esdaille 41). Yet in the conversation Díaz seems less convinced about that hopeful and harmonious alliance. He laments, for instance, the tensions between African Americans and Afro-Dominicans: "I live in Harlem, and am often challenged by African Americans: 'Hey, why can't you folks just speak English?!' Some are upset when we're unwilling to define ourselves merely as Black" (Díaz qtd. in Esdaille 41). In effect, Díaz does not simply aspire for inclusion of or tolerance towards people of color, but solidarity in spite of the prevailing racism among them. As suggested by Ylce Irizarry, Díaz has a keen eye on



"racism amongst peoples of color, despite their shared experiences of discrimination and second-class American citizenship" (98). Beyond being against White racist views towards African Americans and Afro-Dominicans, Díaz criticizes racism between people of color—a reality that renders multiculturalism a fantasy.

In a talk given at the University of Texas at Austin in 2013, Díaz remarked that critics often shy away from discussing issues of race in his writings: "If mentioned, they diminish it as a framework." One could easily agree with him: race is often reduced to changing categories or caught in a celebration of difference. The terms used to talk about racial issues tend to become insufficient or solipsistic. Race is often treated as a pending issue and not as an experienced reality. Contrary to Díaz's statement, however, various scholars in literary and cultural studies engaged his fiction with rich discussions about race in the United States and the Dominican Republic. For example, there is general consensus that Díaz's 1995 short story "How to Date a Browngirl (Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie)" reflects how Dominicans are viewed and view themselves in the United States racially. Marisel Moreno argues that Yunior, the narrator of the short story, cannot escape struggling with his African roots, such as his hair. Yunior's deep-rooted struggle "can be said to mirror the processes that Dominicans in the U.S. are undergoing in their negotiation and reconfiguration of identities in the diaspora" (115). With his short story Díaz dares to explore and ultimately condemns the internalized racist behavior of many Dominicans.

Internalized racism extends to the characters in *Oscar Wao*. One example is Beli, who as mentioned earlier prefers to be called *india* rather than *morena*. Another and more overt example is the characterization of Trujillo, whose regime reasserted the national project of whitening the race ("blanquear la raza"). In the first footnote in *Oscar Wao*, Trujillo is described as a "porty sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin" (2). Given the extremist tone of the narrator, according to Ignacio López-Calvo the novel essentializes and stereotypes Dominicans—politicians as well as common people—as "irredeemable racists who are ashamed of their own African heritage" (76). From a more hopeful standpoint, other critics underscore the potential resistance of Afro-Dominican characters as they navigate and challenge different racial categorizations. Heredia argues that misfortune haunts each and every Dominican in the novel, but that same misfortune helps them develop an attitude of persistence and resistance: "the cultural archive of race and genealogy disrupts the dominant discourse of the Trujillo dictatorship" (212). According to Ashley Kunsu, *Oscar Wao* pays homage to Africa: "Africa haunts the novel from the first sentence ... African slave ships bring with them the *fukú*, and it is the *fukú*, at the novel's opening, that gives shape and possibility to the Dominican and American tales that evolve in later pages" (213). In short, many critics agree on the important role of race in Díaz's writings. Likewise, in the past decades there has been a sense of advancement in regards to conversations about race and racial diversity. But at the same time, there is also an escalating disillusion that these dialogues get locked into vicious circles. Díaz would have agreed with Shu-Mei Shih, when she declared that "We no longer need to place quotation marks around race to emphasize its constructedness. Many scholars, though, feel a deep sense of anxiety that the situation with regard to race may have been normativized and comfortably compartmentalized but not improved... Beyond the academy, the lived realities of racialized populations across the world have not necessarily improved" (1347-48). Paradoxically, too much investment in the discussion of race has brought the same discussion to a halt. As suggested by Díaz in his talk at the University of Texas in Austin in 2013, we shift from one "framework" to another falling behind persistent interracial conflicts. The establishment of racial diversity and multiculturalism has failed to achieve the equal recognition of distinct racial or ethnic groups.

In an article about *Oscar Wao*, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak traces the birth of multiculturalism in the United States to the 1960s. According to her, it emerged as "an offensive against cultural and academic monoculturalism" (3). Russell Jacoby goes even further back, to the founding fathers of the United States and their motto *e pluribus unum*. For Jacoby, the "unedifying motto and the pluralism it implies or belies have bewitched the American republic from its beginning ... Few causes have won such widespread enthusiasm as pluralism and its incarnations as multiculturalism, cultural diversity and cultural pluralism" (31). As much as multiculturalism seems to be inspired by a foundational political agenda of inclusion and tolerance, it has ended up simplifying the complexity of racial or culturally diverse identities and encounters. Likewise, in his 1992 "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor

pointed out that "the peremptory demand for favorable judgments of worth is paradoxically—perhaps one should say tragically—homogenizing" (71). Thus, how can interracial and intercultural encounters be approached without being caught in the celebration of multiculturalism or in a multiculturalist framework?

The goals of Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation (VONA), a writing workshop founded in 1990, address this question. Co-founding writers Díaz, Elmaz Abinader, Víctor Díaz, and Diem Jones envisioned a supportive and constructive environment for writers of color. In his introduction to VONA's 2014 anthology *Dismantle*, which partially appeared as an article in the *New Yorker* on 30 April 2014 and sparked an intense debate before the anthology itself was published, Díaz laments the "too-white" Cornell program in which he was enrolled in the past. He clarifies that the problem of "unbearable too-whiteness" still persists, and thus, hope relies in solidarity between people of color. For instance, Díaz claims that momentary relief from his Cornell years came from a massive Latino student movement on campus and comments that "that solidarity more or less saved my life" ("Introduction" 5). According to Díaz, VONA sought to respond to the urgency many writers of color saw in constant dialoguing with each other: "We saw the need for a space where, as writers of color, our ideas, critiques, concerns, our craft and, above all, our experiences would be privileged rather than marginalized; encouraged rather than trivialized; discussed intelligently rather than exoticized ... We saw the need for a decolonial space ... A workshop where people of color from all different backgrounds and experiences could talk to each other, learn from each other, explore affinities and filiations that lay outside the generalizing categories of our hyphenated identities: affinities and filiations that are the first words in the language of our collective future" ("Introduction" 7).

Indeed, Díaz recognizes and supports interracial dialogue. Yet in his view of the need for a "decolonial space," he implies a necessary distancing from the dominant groups so as not to result in multiculturalist agendas catered to them. In this manner, Díaz's extends Enrique Dussel's concept of "intercultural" coalition between intellectuals and writers of color. Interculturality, according to Dussel, refers to a dialogue that is carried out between intellectuals in the peripheries and opposes multiculturalism. It is not surprising that when referring to multiculturalism, Dussel uses words such as "optimistic," "superficial," "ingenuous," "cynical," and "sterile" (37-40). For Dussel, intercultural dialogue "is neither only nor principally a dialogue between cultural apologists that attempt to demonstrate to others the virtues and values of their own culture. It is, above all, a dialogue between a culture's critical innovators (intellectuals of the 'border,' between their own culture and Modernity) ... Intercultural dialogue brings about a transversal and mutual cross-fertilization among the critical thinkers of the periphery and those from 'border' spaces, and the organization of networks to discuss their own specific problems transforms this process of self-affirmation into a weapon of liberation" (48-49). Intercultural dialogue seeks to spark intense and critical dialogues between intellectuals of the border, before those same dialogues reach privileged intellectuals who have not experienced being part of the periphery or border spaces. Thus, these oblique or "transversal" coalitions, as Dussel describes them, must still be aware of the risk of becoming sterile and ready-made discourses that cease to reflect on identity struggles and interracial conflicts in real life.

In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz reflects on interracial solidarity, but he also recognizes the racial tensions between people of color. The brothers attempted to save Beli, but that sentiment of solidarity is counterpointed with a previous confrontation with Wei, as well as the rejection of the brothers' Asian Latinity in the United States. Díaz refuses to paint a straightforward picture of multiculturalism and he does not applaud the discourse of multiculturalism because it presupposes their inclusion into an exoticizing larger group. Nevertheless, as lucid as Díaz's critiques of the celebration of interracial encounters are, he has also at times made generalizations about them. For example, in an interview with Achy Obejas in 2009, Díaz deploys the cliché statement that the Caribbean is "the most mixed together, hybrid area in the world" (Díaz and Obejas 47). Díaz himself cannot help but participate in the multiculturalist discourse and to add what we could call the fashionable exotic Asian ingredient in order to prove it: "Look, when I'm in Santo Domingo, my family lives in Villa Juana, there are a lot of Chinese, and Koreans ... after the Treaty of San Francisco in 1954, when the Japanese could travel, there were like three thousand who arrived in Santo Domingo... Because in Santo Domingo, like everywhere else throughout the Caribbean, in those tiny countries you find the entire world" (Díaz and Obejas 47). Similarly, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak declares that the "the Caribbean is a busy plurality



of peoples, races, and cultures; it is in constant process of creation and re-creation" (8). Statements like these reproduce unintentionally the discourse of multiculturalism and contrast the Caribbean to an imaginary homogenous rest of the world. They echo Fernando Ortiz's idea that Cuba is an *ajiaco*, a stew of diverse ingredients that becomes a new culinary concoction. As observed by Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, Ortiz's *ajiaco* metaphor has generated fruitful re-definitions of interracial encounters, but it has also helped delineate a multiculturalist framework because it presupposes a finished product that is ready to be consumed. Underneath the metaphor one finds "an essentialist conceptualization of culture as static and therefore finite and exhaustible, as opposed to reproducing or shifting" (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 112). Like *ajiaco*, multiculturalism caters to apologists, the very same consumers of different versions of cultural diversity.

Multiculturalism not only sells well, but also translates well. Díaz's *Oscar Wao* has reached a wide international readership and it has been translated to numerous languages including Spanish, Brazilian and European Portuguese, Romanian, Croatian, Dutch, Turkish, Korean, and Japanese. Likewise, his second collection of stories, *This is How You Lose Her* (2012), has been translated to ten languages. By currently being altogether accessible in more than fifteen languages around the world, it is fair to say that Díaz's fiction engages with a multicultural publishing market. Multiculturalism is on demand. Thus, scholars and writers like Díaz who are involved (for better or for worse) in multicultural or—to be more precise—multiculturalist frameworks must keep in mind the often-overlooked tensions between different racial and ethnic groups. It is here where Díaz's fiction excels: in his portrayal of persistent interracial struggles, which do not result in harmonious finales. Indeed, *Oscar Wao* reflects on the possibility of solidarity between Asians and Afro-Latino(a)s, but at the same time it does not cover up the racist attitudes engrained not only among White supremacists, but also among people of color. Put differently, *Oscar Wao* demonstrates that histories of interracial solidarity must be told alongside histories of conflict. By acknowledging and daring to engage with cultural stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes, Díaz avoids falling into the celebratory and illusive discourse of multiculturalism.

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