

**THE INSCRIPTION OF  
VIOLENCE ON THE  
CULTURE BODY: JUNOT  
DIAZ'S *THE BRIEF  
WONDROUS LIFE OF  
OSCAR WAO*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract*

The human body becomes the place where historical, cultural, social, political and gender wounds can be inscribed. The fragility of the human body is one of the main topics in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008). In this sense, the Dominican past of the main characters and their new lives in the United States are quite important in their physical and psychological growth. The main characters find themselves in a liminal space from where they have to decide whether to change the negative cultural aspects and adapt to their new experiences as a self in-between or to remain as their old selves. The main characters are frustrated because they do not fit into the cultural canons. On the one hand, violence becomes for them the only way to relieve their frustrations. On the other one, the lack of violence becomes the best way to put an end to their past suffering and to achieve a new identity that fits with the new circumstances. Their final outcome will depend on their decisions.

*Resumen*

El cuerpo humano puede verse como un libro en el que se reflejan las heridas históricas, culturales, sociales, políticas y de género. La fragilidad del cuerpo como recipiente cultural es uno de los temas centrales en *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008). El pasado dominicano de los protagonistas y su vida actual en Estados Unidos marcan tanto su desarrollo psicológico como físico. Los personajes se encuentran en un estado liminal donde deben decidir si cambiar los aspectos culturales negativos y adaptarse a las nuevas experiencias que su estado liminal demanda. La salvación o no de estos personajes depende de esta decisión. La violencia se convierte en una manera de verbalizar sus frustraciones por no representar lo que se espera de ellos/as. Sin embargo, la falta de violencia se convierte en la manera más eficaz de acabar con el sufrimiento pasado y conseguir una identidad adaptada a las nuevas circunstancias.

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*Palabras clave:* Cuerpo, violencia, identidad, liminal, República Dominicana, Estados Unidos.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It has been commonly agreed that the body is a container of social, political and gender values. Indeed, in the last decade or so, many analysts have addressed the body for theorizing on diverse aspects of our cultures. Bodies are indicative of our plural identities, becoming an archive from where to analyze culture. Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) deals with the fragility of the body, offering a variety of cultural influences that affect the lives of its Dominican-American protagonists. Indeed, the text is full of references to the body as a clear marker of gender, racial and/or social prejudices that underline the characters' troubled selves.

As this article sets up to defend, the fragile body performs culture in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Significantly, the body becomes on many occasions the target of physical violence, implying that cultural differences scar the body—and the life—of their characters. Thus, tortures, brutal physical aggressions and violations are key for plot development, since, whenever they occur, they do not only imply a mere physical change on the characters' bodies but they also mean a turning point in their lives. The body in pain expresses, then, the characters' difficulty when adapting to new realities in their lives. Moreover, and if we advance in this argument, the novel also suggests that inflicting violence on the physical body can be regarded as a means of relieving one's frustrations. Characters are troubled because their fragile bodies do not fit into any of the accepted Dominican-American cultural rules and, as a consequence, they inflict violence on themselves or on their families. Violence can be regarded, in this sense, as the only way of verbalizing—and hence externalizing—the physical wounds of the past.

As a theoretical framework, this work will draw on materialist analyses on the body, whereby corporeality functions as a site for the reflection of culture. The intersection of biological and cultural process leads to what has been termed here as the "body-in-process", a concept that further describes the complexity of the Dominican-American experience. This idea points toward the theory of "becoming", articulated by the works of Rossi Braidotti (2002) or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004), among others. According to these philosophies, the body is understood as a process that changes and transforms as a result of its relations with

other humans, practices or techniques. Moreover, we will take into account the formulations written by Ross Poole or Amy Kaminsky, who consider diaspora as a process of changing that affects the human body. In this sense, this article applies the theories related to the immigrant experiences—the trip, the relationship of the immigrant people with both their country of origin and the new one, the process of adaptation—to how it is experienced bodily.

These ideas provide a conceptual framework for corporeal pain and its impact upon cultural identification, as will become evident in the analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Our point is that this approach, which rests on a non-dualistic understanding of human subjectivity, is crucial for the analysis of texts where the body—and the self—suffers as a consequence to its inability to adapt to the dominant culture. In our attempt to illustrate how the body articulates cultural worries in the novel, the issue of violence will be of special relevance. While the fragile body cannot escape violence, its scars and wounds talk about the character's painful past and allow them to head for a new identity.

## II. THE FRAGILITY OF THE BODY-IN-PROCESS

The focus of this section is on the so-called “body-in process” and how this figuration affects the subjectivities of the main protagonists in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In this sense, and as Braidotti and Deleuze and Guattari argue, the body, as a site of human practices, does not remain fixed or static but it is continually in the making, affecting subjectivities. Yet, it is precisely the fluid nature of the body-in-process what makes it function as a repository of fear and, eventually, of violence in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In other words, violence is reproduced in the “processual” bodies of its Dominican-American characters, offering an ambiguous picture of cultural in-betweenness. In order to illustrate the book's claims about the fragility of the body-in-process, it is necessary to refer to the idea of in-betweenness and how corporeality is aligned with the characters' vulnerability to cultural changes.

Possessor of a “weird” body, the protagonist—Oscar—is depicted as an in-between figure. As an adolescent, Oscar's body is considered as ugly, disgusting and close to unhealthiness, and hence we read: “[e]arly adolescence hit him especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious” (Díaz 2008:16). From very early, his body becomes a definer of his identity, and throughout the whole book we read how he is constantly referred to as “gordo asqueroso” or “fat lovely nerdy kid”, negative phrases that link the fragile physicality of his body to his troubled subjectivity. In

this sense, his weak, ugly, and unhealthy body can be regarded as abject as described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horrors* (1982). According to Kristeva, the abject disturbs identity and order, and does not respect borders, positions and rules. For her, not only filthiness and lack of cleanliness cause abjection but also the in-between, the ambiguous or the composite (1982:4). In this sense, one may well argue that Oscar is an outcast entrapped in an abject body that is undefined and constantly in the making.

This negative idea of in-betweenness is further reinforced by the fact that Oscar feels he belongs nowhere. His body does not conform to the normative Dominican, or to the American standards. The lack of an outstanding sign of cultural identity is considered as something to be ashamed of. Oscar does not look like a Dominican boy, and the only physical trace of Dominicaness—his eyes, which resemble his grandfather's—is considered as indecent: “[y]ou have the same eyes as your abuelo, his Nena Inca had told him on one of his visits to the DR, which should have been some comfort—who doesn't like resembling an ancestor?—except this particular ancestor had ended his days in prison” (Díaz 2008:20). Worst of all, he does not look American either:

And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his “anty-pussy devices”, Al and Miggs, his only friends—sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded. (2008:20)

Oscar's body is constantly compared to normative bodies and regarded as inferior. When dealing with the supremacy of the Western body, Petersen assumes that there are some male bodies which “matter” more than others and, therefore, “particular male bodies, namely the bodies of white, European, middle-class, heterosexual men, have been constructed as the standard for measuring and evaluating other bodies” (1998:41). Accordingly, Oscar's body is evaluated as “other”.

Apart from his undefining looks, Oscar is described as weak, which is translated in the fact that he does not show to have any attitude toward sports, does not possess a remarked sexual instinct and becomes highly emotional at times. In relation to the topic of the male body and its connotations of power, Connell has argued that “[t]he social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body. This is one of the many ways in which the power of men becomes ‘naturalized’” (1987:85). Hence, the bodily ideal that has come to dominate the definition of masculinity is linked to muscles, and as Dutton has explained, the muscular body has been both a power and a pleasure symbol for Western cultures (1995:16). Far from this, Oscar does not conform to the definition of ideal masculinity but quite the opposite: “[Oscar] has none of the Higher Powers

of your typical Dominican male [...] couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl" (Díaz 2008:20).

The popular belief that men possess a "primordial force" is linked to the naturalization of male aggression. In relation to this issue, Petersen argues that in contexts such as competitive sports, military and organizational life, male competitiveness, toughness, and desire to control are taken as indicative of a natural male aggression (1998:55). Apart from psychological accounts, hormonal theories and human genetics have also provided with biological explanations for male aggression. Even from the 1970s and 1880s onwards, when biological accounts started to be displaced in favor of social learning theories, there is "an innate predisposition to seek appropriate role identity which, for men, includes expressions of aggressive behavior" (Petersen 1998: 57). Oscar can be considered as a "soft" man, and therefore we read how "[h]is affection [...] broke his heart each and every day [...]. He cried often for his love of some girl or another. Cried in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him" (Díaz 2008:24). His sentimentalism is, like his body, a cause of public shame: "[Oscar] was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (2008:24). And, since "[e]verybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked it" (2008:24).

Moreover, his lack of a normative sexuality is regarded as a dishonor for his male friends: "I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him [...]" (Díaz 2008:180). His accused lack of sexual activity produces great embarrassment to his Dominican family. His uncle Rudolfo advises him at some point: "You have to grab a muchacha, y meteselo" (2008:24), or "Oscar, you are going to die a virgin unless you start changing" (2008:25). The "innate" masculine sexual power contributes to the perpetuation of masculinism that, according to Brittan, tends to give a special status to male sexuality:

It is often regarded as being some kind of primordial force which sweeps everything before it. It is sharply distinguished from feminine sexuality which, until very recently, was seen as being passive and male dependent. Male sexuality is constructed as autonomous, adventurous and exploratory. Of course the reality is far different from the image. Very few men are sexual athletes who can meet the Hollywood performance requirements popularized by Clint Eastwood and Burt Lancaster. (1989:46)

The models of masculinism provided by Hollywood find a discrepancy between cultural expectations and men's actual behavior. Precisely because of his lack of an overt sexuality, Oscar is accused of not meeting and keeping up with the cultural standards and expectations of masculinity.

Hence, Oscar's body-in-process does not conform to any cultural rules, what makes his identity be regarded as fluid, changeable and unstable. In this sense, his could be considered as a body without organs, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004), whereby the body is seen as always extending beyond itself and being articulated by practices or institutions. As defined by them, this body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs but a body upon which that serves as organs is distributed in the form of molecular multiplicities (2004:34). It is composed of unstable matters, of set of flows moving in all directions at various speeds. It goes beyond any opposition between the one and the multiple (2004:170). Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the body's possibilities of mutation, transformation and change. In the same line of thought, Braidotti suggests that the body is much more than its organs but it has a materiality that is not biological (2002:21). She uses the idea of "nomadic subjectivity" to refer to the mobility of the body-in-process.

One can affirm, however, that Oscar's in-betweenness results in pain in the sense that his fractured body/subjectivity prevents him from adapting to any culture. Precisely because of this, his body becomes on many occasions the object of violence, evident when we read: "The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads"(Díaz 2008:49). As a consequence of the embodiment of (physical and verbal) pain, Oscar is urged to change his physical body and become culturally accepted. At some point in his life, he even feels the need to have a "recognizable" body, one that fits into a culture, one that allows him to adapt to new realities. Indeed, physical transformation is regarded as the only solution for his problems, and he is advised so on many occasions: "Cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise" (2008:25). He undergoes a process of cultural "normalization":

Spent a week looking at himself in the mirror, turning every which way, taking stock, not flinching, and decided at last to be like Roberto Durán: No más. That Sunday he went to Chucho's and had the barber shave his Puerto Rican 'fro off'. (Wait a minute, Chucho's partner said. You're Dominican?). Oscar lost the moustache next, and then the glasses, bought contacts with the money he was making at the lumberyard and tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness, tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer. (Díaz 2008:30)

Throughout his life, he keeps on living in between both cultures but, unlike her sister Lola, he does not feel part of any of them. Neither does he look for his own identity, but he tries to imitate other men who represent the stereotype of the Dominican culture. He does not try to become a Dominican-American, but a Dominican man.



His friend Junior is also concerned about Oscar's need to adapt his body to the cultural standards of beauty and starts the so-called "Project Oscar" or "the Oscar Redemption Program" (Díaz 2008:179), which consisted of "got him to start watching his diet and to stop talking crazy negative" (2008:176). Yet, and in spite of this "Big Experiment", he does not succeed in changing and will be finally recalled "the fat loser" (Díaz 2008:181). His body is, once more, a sign of his inability to adapt to circumstances: "You are disgusting, disgusting and even Melvin [...] started calling him Jabber the Butt" (2008:177). As it will be discussed in the following section, at the end of the novel, when Oscar finally starts to head for a physical and emotional change, his body becomes a clear repository of violence, what will cause his tragic death. In sum, Oscar's body and identity are fragile as a consequence of his body-in-process.

Similar arguments can be applied to two of the other main characters, Oscar's mother, Beli, and his sister, Lola. Both of them have to live in-between two cultures: the American and the Dominican one. Lola was born in the US, but she looks like a real Dominican. As it has been contended, culture is reflected on the body. However, culture is not something static, but dynamic that is constantly changing. As part of culture, the body has to change in order to adapt. If it is a body caught in-between two different cultures, the change has to be even more thoughtful and evident. Both the movement entailed in the physical crossing from one country to the other and the symbolical movement between two cultures—one represented by the family and the other by the society where a person lives—imply a change to adapt to the different cultural and temporal features. Since Beli and Lola are forced to live in-between two completely different cultures, movement and multiplicity are part of the formation of their subjectivities. As Poole argues, culture is a process of self-formation that is constantly changing:

Culture is process rather than product. A culture is not made once and for all. It is continually being remade, reaffirmed and sometimes changed [...] It is a process of self-formation, not merely formation of the self; it is the process by which human individual acquire various social identities. (1999: 13)

Since culture is a process—and change one of the key features of a process—, an identity based on a cultural process has to be always changing to adapt to new circumstances. That is, identity is defined by change and adaptation and not by culture itself. For a Dominican immigrant or a Dominican descendant living in another country the process of adaptation also entails the multiplicity of experiences and cultural differences that he/she needs to blend in order to get his/her own cultural identity in process. This new identity is not only based on cultural elements of both cultures but also on personal experiences. In other words, one needs to find his/her own in-between identity. As Donnan and Wilson state:

Culture and identity [...] do not disappear among the people who make the crossing. They simply change: they change within their home communities

because of the loss entailed in their goings as well as the new political and economic context in which they find themselves and they change in the communities who are now host to the border crossing. (1999:114-115)

The crossing implies a physical movement, a change, from one place to another. It is not only the exile, or any other kind of migrational movement, but also the step that comes after it what means change. It is what Kaminsky calls the “desexilio”:

For women it is also a learning of the way to occupy space safely. As exile is a bodily experience, acculturation, which is part of the process of one version of desexilio, is also experienced bodily. (1999:16)

For Kaminsky, both exile and des-exile are experienced bodily. That is, exile—or any other kind of migration—implies a process of leaving part of one’s place and culture behind to adapt to the new one. And, if exile is a bodily experience, it means that the body has to change to adapt to the new circumstances. This argument can be applied to the female characters of the story. Beli is called “the Empress of Diaspora” (Díaz 2008:106), an ironic statement if we consider that she does not adapt to the changes in her life and her body suffers the consequences of this lack of adaptation. When she gets pregnant she suffers a beating that forces her into exile since remaining in the Dominican Republic becomes a threat for her. She leaves the Dominican Republic but, no matter how far she is, she still keeps on her body the damages inflicted upon it. Nevertheless, she maintains a strong hold to her homeland not only in an emotional sense but also in a physical one. This physical hold cannot be only understood as the moving back and forth between one country and the other, but as an emotional hold to her past because of her physical wounds. Since the scars on her back remain her whole life, there is no complete loss in Beli’s process, not even a complete change. Neither does she gain anything in the crossing. Her cultural identity is just her Dominican one and not a Dominican-American one. Her body still remains as it was when living in the Dominican Republic. She is still this “mujerón” she was but, since her body does not change, it does not adapt to the new circumstances. Even worse, she fails to adapt, and, therefore, her body reacts to this by becoming sick with cancer.

When she is a girl, she is called “prieta” or “fea quemada”, both nicknames to refer to the body and not to the mind. When she becomes a woman, her body changes. She seems to get everything she wants: “even with the apron on she looked potent, like someone who was going to be someone” (Díaz 2008:75). She becomes a strong woman whose body leads her to a great future: “She wasn’t a maldita ciguapa, with her feet pointing backward in the past. Her feet pointed forward, she reminded la Inca over and over. Pointed to the future” (2008:81). But her future is not as it was supposed to be. She is sent to the US to be saved only to get an illness that kills her. As Heredia says, “as she ages, Belicia develops health issues due to her job as a cleaning lady in New Jersey. She learns to sacrifice her time and body



for the welfare of her children and their future. Women's bodies, especially those of the Dominican immigrant working class, cannot sustain a family forever" (2010:215). Once more, her body suffers the changes in her life. She has to sacrifice her body to get a good present and a better future. This illness means the last and worst turning point in Beli's life.

When she is young, her breasts become the symbol of her powerfulness: "by summer's end she'd become un mujerón total, acquiring that body of hers, that body that made her famous in Bain [...] that summer our girl caught a cuirass [...] she was La Tetra Supreme" (Díaz 2008:91-92). The cancer attacks her breast making her lose her power. Losing her breast and her hair means the beginning of her decadence as a Dominican woman. Neither has she been able to adapt to her new life in the US, which means her decadence as a Dominican-American woman. The Empress of Diaspora becomes then a powerless queen without a throne.

Lola has to experience bodily being a woman in a Dominican family and living in the US:

Things had been bad between us all year. How could they not have been? She was my Old World Dominican mother and I was her only daughter, the one she had raised up herself with the help of nobody, which meant it was her duty to keep me crushed under her heel... If you don't grow up like I did then you don't judge. You don't know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—especially the ones that are never around. What it's like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave. (Díaz 2008:55-56)

She is always under her mother's control, what means that she is not free to do what she wants. Although she is a Dominican-looking girl, she is not like her mother. She lives in both cultures at ease. She manages to blend both her Dominican cultural experiences and her American ones. She goes back and forth in a physical movement between the island and the US and her own body performs it:

Oscar's sister, Lola, was a lot more practical. Now that her crazy years were over—what Dominican girl doesn't have those?—she'd turned into one of those tough Jersey Dominicans, a long-distance runner who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a cat in front of you without a speck of vergüenza. (Díaz 2008:24-25)

She behaves like an American girl, changing her behavior and adapting to her life in the US. She decides to have her long hair cut as a way of breaking with the strong holds of her Dominican origins. She does not try to end up with her Dominican identity. She tries to change the oppressive part of it:

When she was in fourth grade she'd been attacked by an older acquaintance, and this was common knowledge throughout the family (...), and surviving that hurricane of pain, judgment, and bolinche had made her tougher than adamantine.

Recently she'd cut her hair short—flipping her mother yet again—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. (Díaz 2008:24-25)

For Lola, her Dominican-style hair maintains her attached to the patriarchal culture that makes her suffer and does not let her be free. Her hair is a symbol of her cultural and gender identity, an identity imposed on her by family and tradition. Having long hair, as she is supposed to, implies that she has to behave as her Dominican culture expects a girl to behave. She has her hair cut in order to forget the fact that an older acquaintance abused on her when she was a child. Cutting her hair means a threat both to her family and to her Dominican culture. She is no longer a Dominican girl, but a Dominican American, a Jersey Dominican. Thus, cutting her hair is a mean of adaptation and healing. Unlike her mother's body, hers changes to survive in both cultures. She builds up her own identity. An identity that is, at the same time, a mixture of two fixed ones, the Dominican and the American. She becomes, then, responsible for her own identity and her self-formation just by changing one part of her body.

As we have attempted to illustrate in this section, the fragile body articulates cultural worries and it can lead them either to change or to remain the same. Depending on their cultural choice, characters get a better or a worse life outcome. Although the scars and wounds talk about the characters' painful past and allow them to head for a new identity, they do not always take good profit of it. Their identity is constantly in the making if they let them change. Whereas Beli's past and her inability to adapt to her present determine her life and her fatal outcome, Lola's ability to live in both cultures at ease assures her success. Oscar's transforming and undefined body, far from meaning a safe representation of the enactment of his subjectivity, is an object of fear and violence. Unlike Lola, he does not live in both cultures at ease, not even in one of them. For him, the idea of in-betweenness means being nowhere. His Dominican culture expects him to be a "macho"—a strong handsome guy who makes love with a lot of girls, and not a fat and shy boy—, whereas the American culture requires him not to be a nerd. Oscar's lack of cultural adaptation is materialized on his body.

### III. VIOLENCE AS REDEMPTION

This section aims to illustrate how the body—as it is suggested in the novel—can be understood as the receiver of punishment, whereby physical abuses are the way of

imposing one's supremacy, or following a tradition based on it. Furthermore, the body in pain also allows the characters to get rid of their past, becoming the means by which they can be healed.

Oscar's obsession to become a Dominican "macho" leads him to constant physical punishments up to the point of ending up with his life. Hence, the idea of violence as a means of healing becomes important for Oscar's transformation and final outcome. In spite of its "in-betweenness", or being nowhere, Oscar's body does not really change throughout the novel, and, although his family humbly attempts to "normalize" it, he remains as an "other". Precisely, his depressing body becomes a reflection of the problems in his life, and hence we read at one point in the novel: "[Oscar was] reviewing his miserable life. Wishing he'd been born in a different body" (Díaz 2008:190). Sentences like this evidence the novel's concern with the body as a recipient of culture and identity. Doing sport to lose weight—in a way that his body cannot stand—becomes one of Oscar's main obsessions. He inflicts violence on his body as the only means to relieve his psychological frustration. Yet, his effort becomes fruitless, and he does not get the expected physical transformation.

Even after the so-called "transformation", and his shy "advances" with respect to his body—"Oscar started dressing up more [...] Even started running again" (2008:185) [...] He had lost even more weight and was trying his best to keep his hair trim and his face shaved. He looked, if you relieve it, good" (2008:195)—he does not feel at ease with his life, which is clear when he tries to self-inflict violence on his body, up to the point of attempting to commit suicide. His failed effort to fit into one culture causes psychological pain that he cannot longer stand. Once more, the healing of the psychological and cultural wounds implies physical punishment.

As a matter of fact, and before his "real" transformation starts, his body—and hence his life—remains the same, and he continues being and object of disgust. This fact is evident when he gets back home after graduation, undergoing no apparent physical or emotional change: "[Oscar] left a virgin, returned one" (Díaz 2008:263). Indeed, we are reported that he still has no social life (2008:266), or the "girls turned away in disgust when he walked past" (2008:267). Even Oscar recognizes at one point: "I am the permanent bachelor" (2008:267). His suicide thoughts have not left him: "On the outside, Oscar simply looked tired, no taller, no fatter, only the skin under his eyes, pouched from years of quite desperation, had changed. Inside, he was in a World of hurt" (2008:268). Thus a deformed body is synonym of an unsuccessful life.

Just at the very end of his existence, once he has met "the girl of his dreams", he tries to change his life. Ironically, this fact will have a tragical outcome. It is after he returns to Santo Domingo for vacation and meets Ybon when "his real life"

starts: “Her name was Ybon Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his real life” (Díaz 2008:279). So his new life starts when he tries to reaffirm his Dominicaness: “he was a not-so-fat fat boy who’s never kissed a girl, never even laid in bed with one, and now the World is waving a beautiful puta under his nose. Ybon, he was sure, was the Higher Power’s last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude” (2008: 283) and starts looking for a change in his life, although this is not totally achieved, since he has no kiss, nor sexual contact with her: “Of course not. Miracles only go so far” (2008:290).

It is at this point when his body becomes seriously hurt in an attempt to search for a change in his miserable life. He is deadly beaten by El Capitan right after the first kiss: “In the middle of August Oscar finally met the Capitan. But he also got his first kiss ever. So you could say that day changed his life” (Díaz 2008:293). So change is linked to brutal violence on his body: “Broken nose, shattered zeugmatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion” (2008: 301). Indeed, the last days of his life, right before the fatal episode that will end up with his life takes place, his body can be said to undergo a real transformation: “You should have seen him. He was so thin, had lost all the weight and was still, still, wanting to put the past behind him, start a new life” (2008:312). Oscar’s fluid—and punished—body speaks of his inability to adapt to new circumstances, and to change his own cultural self. He fails because he does not become responsible of his own identity. Hence, physical violence means a turning point in the characters’ lives, though it is not always for good. Oscar finds unable to change his life—nor his body—and when he does so at the very end of the novel, his body is violently beaten. Yet, this act is closely linked to a pleasurable experience—kissing the girl of his dreams—allowing him to feel happy and forgetting his miserable past.

In a similar way, Beli inflicts violence on her daughter as a means of healing her and the long history of violence she suffers back in the Dominican Republic, as well as her frustration because of her inability to adapt. Beli’s body is like a book on Dominican-American history and its scars describe the experiences she has undergone. As Guidotti-Hernandez argues, “if the body is a text that is written upon and rewritten upon [...], then we can also come to understand the violated body as a living narrative” (2007: 79). Beli’s body is a perfect example of this. She bears the scars that the boiling water left on her back and that meant another turning point in her story, but in this case it was for good. La Inca hears rumors that the girl who was scalded was her nephew’s daughter, the one she was searching. Thanks to this, she finds her. La Inca did not beat her in order to heal both her physical and her psychological pain. It seems to work for a time, as long as she is living with her, but not when she moves to the US carrying these wounds with her.

There is another critical moment in her long history of physical violence. When she gets pregnant, her lover’s wife orders to beat her until she suffers a

miscarriage. This means another turning point in her life, a life of physical violence. After this episode, she moves to the US to begin her new life as an exiled Dominican woman. She does not forget, though. No matter how hard she beats her daughter to relieve her mind, she does not succeed because she is using violence. That is, inflicting physical harm means repeating her Dominican past and heritage. The body remembers as the mind does, and using physical violence cannot heal it. Although for Beli violence seems to be the only way of forgetting the physical wounds of her past, it is not the right way to adapt to the new circumstances in her life and to change her history. On the contrary, it means maintaining and causing more suffering. Whereas violence means suffering, lack of punishment suggests healing.

Lola does not inflict violence on herself or on any other member of her family, and she is able to heal her wounds and survive. Lola has to suffer the beatings and the scorn of a mother who does not forget her past in her homeland: “que muchacha tan fea, she said in disgust, splashing the rest of her coffee in the sink. Fea’s become my new name. Not nothing new, really. She’s been saying stuff like that all our lives” (Díaz 2008: 55). She calls her “fea” as they called her—“La Prieta Quemada or la Fea Quemada” (2008: 261)— or as Trujillo’s sister, who ordered the beating that forced Beli into exile. If her mother tries to heal herself and forget her past by beating her, Lola does it by breaking with her past and by threatening her mother:

She would hit us anywhere, in front of anyone, always free with the chanclas and the correa, but now with her cancer there’s not much she can do anymore. The last time she tried to whale on me it was because of my hair, but instead of cringing or running I punched her hand [...]. (2008:55)

She is not a “fea” who changes to become a “mujerón”, she changes to be a woman in-between. Cutting her hair makes her stronger and able to avoid her mother’s attacks. As her mother becomes weaker when she loses her hair, Beli becomes stronger when she has it cut, a fact that could further explain why she survives whereas her mother does not. The losing of power of the traditional representative of the Dominican Republic, which forges her identity, means the beginning of her empowerment as a woman living between two cultures.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The body-in-process, understood as a fluid, indeterminate and complex idea that affects subjectivities, has proved to be a useful tool for the analysis of cultural

identity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. As it has been contended here, being in-between two cultures marks—and hurts—the body of the characters, depicted as fragile and vulnerable. The body, like culture, is in constant movement in its attempt to adapt to new circumstances. Both culture and body are always in process, either forced or deliberate. When changes are imposed, characters do not adapt to them and the body reacts with more suffering, even with an illness. When the transformation is voluntary, even if it has been forced by a violent act, the body adapts to the change and can be healed. Hence, the idea of self-conscious physical change becomes synonym of healing and success.

On the one hand, the physical jobs that emigrants are forced to do cause damage on their bodies, as it is the case of Beli, whose body does not adapt to the new circumstances in her life. On the other hand, and mainly due to physical features, emigrants may suffer discrimination in both cultures because their bodies do not fit in any physical cultural standard, neither the Dominican nor the American one. It is what happens with the novel's protagonist, Oscar, whose body is in pain when he tries to adapt his life to the cultural canons. His body is neither Dominican nor American. His transformation is aimed at becoming part of one culture. In other words, his body suffers the consequences of his desperate attempts to become a real Dominican. His transformation is led by his wish to fit into one of the two cultures and not to remain a person in-between. However, it is precisely his obsession for fitting into cultural standards what makes him fail. Likewise, his mother also fails, since she is not able to adapt to the changes in her life. She wants to keep on being the “mujerón” she was when she still lived in the Dominican Republic. Lola, on the contrary, succeeds and adjusts to cultural standards, since her changes are self-consciously made from a place located in the hyphen, in between both cultures. The body becomes, then, the place where the two cultures collide and the way to solve the conflict that it provokes is by means of adaptation, only possible thanks to the changes undergone to make both cultures live in peace.

The history of the Dominican Republic is full with references to violent acts inflicted on the body. In this sense, this work shows the impact that violence has on the body and on the mind. The three main characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suffer physical violence inflicted on them. Beli has the opportunity to heal herself but she fails since her long history of violence is verbalized inflicting more violence. It becomes for her the only way of being powerful. Lola does not suffer so many violent attacks as her mother does, though she has to suffer her mother's attempts to heal her past by beating her. Nevertheless, she learns how to heal herself in a different way, that is, by taking care of herself and her body. Oscar sees violence as the only means by which he can overcome his miserable life and start a new one, although unfortunately, he dies in this attempt of searching for happiness.



Because of what has been said, we can conclude that, whereas physical punishment is considered to be the main cause of physical suffering as well as of personal and cultural failure, self-conscious change becomes the best way to fight against violence in a peaceful way and, hence, succeed in life.

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