



The ubiquitous ocean: naval conquest, forms of citizenship, and attempted emancipation in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

When Beli loses her virginity to Jack Pujols in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, her idealistic “sense of a journey starting” is subverted through the language of violent naval seafaring, as when, for instance, she is both emotionally and physically enamoured with Pujols “hook, line, and sinker.” This contamination of the intimate sphere with the linguistic framework of maritime circumnavigation is frequently deployed throughout the novel to adulterate the Cabral's private lives with allusions to the historical commodification of oceanic conquest and the violent oppressions that these conquests entailed. While the intergenerational trauma of colonial history within *Oscar Wao* has been widely discussed amongst critics, little has been said about how and why it is frequently rendered through naval language, much of which has roots in weaponry, strategy, commodity, and enslavement tactics traceable to the Middle Passage. This essay builds on Melissa M. Gonzalez's distinctions between decoloniality and full emancipation, and Donette Francis's conceptualisation of “sexual citizenship” amongst Caribbean women, to argue that, in reading the Cabral's private lives and lineage through the lens of a naval colonial tradition, complete liberation from original New World conquests remains inaccessible, even as Afro-Caribbean descendants seek belonging, citizenship, and safety amidst postcolonial diasporas. Through these new considerations of the novel's naval and oceanic semantics, this work also illuminates the perennial role of Paul Gilroy's theoretical Black Atlantic in contemporary literature, as Díaz applies ideas of Black cultures which transcend national boundaries but remain interconnected through a violent, transoceanic historical experience to his fictional rendering of the transatlantic Cabral family lineage.

Keywords Transatlantic fiction · Ocean · Atlantic · Atlantic studies · Postcolonial fiction · Contemporary fiction · Decolonial literature · Decolonial · Dominican Republic · American literature · Latinx literature

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When Beli loses her virginity to Jack Pujols in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, her idealistic "sense of a journey starting" is subverted through the language of violent naval seafaring, as when, for instance, she is both emotionally and physically enamoured with Pujols "hook, line, and sinker."¹ This contamination of the intimate sphere with the linguistic framework of maritime circumnavigation is frequently deployed throughout the novel to adulterate the Cabrals' private lives with allusions to the historical commodification of oceanic conquest and the violent oppressions that these conquests entailed. While the intergenerational trauma of colonial history within *Oscar Wao* has been widely discussed, little has been said about how and why it is frequently rendered through naval language, much of which has roots in weaponry, strategy, commodity, and enslavement tactics traceable to the Middle Passage. This essay will build on Melissa M. Gonzalez's distinctions between decolonialism and full emancipation, and Donette Francis's conceptualization of "sexual citizenship" amongst Caribbean women, to argue that, in reading the Cabrals' private lives and lineage through the lens of a naval colonial tradition, complete liberation from original New World conquests remains inaccessible, even as its subjects seek belonging, citizenship, and safety amidst postcolonial diasporas. Along with the work of Gonzalez and Francis, as well as the significant body of critical essays published in 2016 titled *Junot Diaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, derived from the conference of the same name, Paul Gilroy's seminal theory of *The Black Atlantic* is a significant theoretical bedrock of this work, as I treat Díaz's novel as an engagement and complication of Gilroy's depictions of interconnectivities between postcolonial states and diasporas.

Similarly, the work's oceanic and seafaring syntactical lens locates it within broader maritime literary studies, a growing subject which illustrates how the sea—rather than landed geographies like nations, areas, or continents—can offer new perspectives through which literature and culture might be read. We can locate the nascent formalization of maritime studies with Edward Kamau Brathwaite's 1983 essay "Missile and Capsule," which introduced the term "tidalectics" to describe a cyclical and oceanic lens through which to understand the Caribbean region and its people's stories and histories.² Patricia Noxolo, Ronald Cummings, and Kevon Rhiney expand the metaphor's maritime imagery and describe Brathwaite's tidalectics as a "consciousness that, like the waves, takes us constantly back and forth, here and there."³ Recently maritime studies have applied this oceanic lens to a wide scope of Caribbean and Latin American literatures, with Mabel Moraña utilizing the term "hydrocriticism" to illuminate colonial aspects of the literary sea and how bodies of water can be mediums of "controlling people, lands, and/or natural resources."⁴ Isabel Hofmeyr adds "hydrocolonialism" to the hydroliterary framework and addresses

¹ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2008), 100. All references in this essay are to this edition and will henceforth be cited parenthetically.

² Edward K. Brathwaite, "Missile and Capsule" in *Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms*, ed. by J. Martini (Bremen, Universität Bremen, 1983), p. 22.

³ Patricia Noxolo et.al, *Routledge Handbook of Caribbean Studies* (Routledge, 2025), 1.

⁴ Mabel Moraña, "Introduction: Texts, Textures, and Watermarks," in *Hydrocriticism and Colonialism in Latin America* (2022), 3.



in broad terms possible violent colonization through water, in water, on water, or within the “idea” of water itself.⁵ In *Maritime Mobilities and Anglophone Culture*, critics combine this metaphorical sea ideation with material realities of the ocean as a “deathbed” for racialized and illegalized humans within colonial and violent frameworks.⁶

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is ripe for this hydrocritical and oceanic literary framework; its core characters in the Cabral family are governed, knowingly and not, by the behaviour of the seas surrounding the Antilles region and, more specifically, the colonial tools wrought by those oceans. Yet there is a broad remit of linguistic frameworks through which we might read Díaz’s novel, and a significant amount of scholarship has thus far focussed on various elements of the novel’s jargon—whether its colloquial Spanglish, “nerd genre” speech, or magical realist mythic anecdotes. For several critics, the result of these linguistic choices and syntactic frameworks results in the novel’s core decolonial essence—what Elena Machado Sáez describes as a “picture” of a “superheroic literary text” (in reference to Anne Garland Mahler’s work), “that breaks through oppression to posit an ideally marginal but resistant diasporic subject.”⁷ This work concurs with Sáez’s scepticism of the text’s capacity “to escape the influence of the nation-state, or, more specifically, the institutional violence and ideology of dictatorship.”⁸ While Sáez focuses on the Dominican Republic’s internal authoritarian strife and argues that certain oppressive influences are inescapable, represented by the narrator in Yunior playing the text’s dictator, this work looks beyond the nation-state to argue that linguistic oceanic frameworks of transatlantic colonization render the text inescapable from violent colonial memory more broadly.

Many critics, including José David Saldívar and Paula M. Moya, have highlighted the decolonial elements of *Oscar Wao*, and both critics have referred to Díaz’s “search for decolonial love,” a self-conscious interest that is typified in Díaz’s interview with Moya, in which the author himself delineates the concept in his work: “The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love.”⁹ Moya and Saldívar, in their analyses of Díaz’s decolonial framework, both also refer to another point in the interview, in which Díaz acknowledges and extols the published fictions of women of colour in the 1980’s and 1990’s, such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Sandra Cisneros, amongst many others, for the “radical emancipatory epistemologies—the source code of our

⁵ Isabel Hofmeyre, *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism, and the custom house* (Duke University Press, 2022), 26.

⁶ Alexandra Ganser and Charne Lavery, “Introduction: Maritime Im/Mobilities” in *Maritime Mobilities in Anglophone Literature and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 10.

⁷ Elena Machado Sáez, “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance,” in *Contemporary Literature*, vol 52, no. 3 (2011), 525.

⁸ Sáez, 526.

⁹ Junot Díaz and Paula M. L. Moya, “The Search for Decolonial Love. A Conversation Between Junot Díaz and Paula M.L. Moya,” in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, ed. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, Jose David Saldívar (Durham: Duke University Press 2016), 405.



future liberation,” that mark these authors’ approaches to the female body.¹⁰ Both scholars, in turn, extend Díaz’s acknowledgement of the canonical evocation of emancipatory codes to Díaz’s own work, with Saldívar suggesting, for instance, that Díaz also offers liberatory counter-strategies through a “radical questioning from the body,” which interacts with characters’ “dreams, fantasies, drives.”¹¹ These dreams and fantasies involve a central element of decolonial thought: the movement beyond the historical to excavate an emancipated or liberated future. In sum, Saldívar uses Díaz’s work to further explore and exemplify Emma Pérez’s comparison of colonial and decolonial imagery:

The difference between the colonial and decolonial imaginaries is that the colonial remains the inhibiting trace, accepting power relations as they are, perhaps confronting them, but not reconfiguring them. To remain within the colonial imaginary is to remain the colonial object who cannot be subject until decolonized. The decolonial imaginary challenges power relations to decolonize notions of otherness to move into a liberatory terrain.¹²

Melissa M. Gonzalez also holds *Oscar Wao* up to Pérez’s description of decoloniality, but focuses on the term “liberation” to suggest that while *Wao* does engage with decolonial discourse, particularly through its reclamation of minority history, the novel also presents nuances between true liberation and decolonial aesthetics, and that “Instead of moving into any ‘liberatory terrain,’ the novel casts deep suspicion on the possibility of liberation.”¹³ Gonzalez argues that the novel instead embraces “anti-emancipatory ethics,” an ethics that she identifies at the intersection of race, gender, and neoliberalism, which fosters “power’s wilier, harder-to resist-effects vis-à-vis our construction as sexual and ethnic subjects by social forces.”¹⁴ These social forces, in turn, require that many Dominican women perform as “entrepreneurial actors,” a state that is marked by the women’s quest for power through property ownership and wealth accumulation, which is synonymous with safety and security, but which is cyclically oppressive and antagonistic to full emancipation.¹⁵

In tandem with Gonzalez’s focus on the economic inaccessibility of liberatory terrain, this argument will draw on Donette Francis’s concept of “sexual citizenship.” David Evans coined the term “sexual citizenship” in 1993, and Francis reformulates

¹⁰ Paula M.L. Moya, “Dismantling The Master’s House. The Decolonial Literary Imaginations of Audre Lorde.

And Junot Díaz,” in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, ed. by Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, Jose David Saldívar (Durham: Duke University Press 2016), 247.

¹¹ Jose Saldívar, “Junot Díaz’s Search For Decolonial Aesthetics and Love,” in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, ed. by Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, Jose David Saldívar (Durham: Duke University Press 2016), 344.

¹² Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 110.

¹³ Melissa M. Gonzalez, “The Only Way Out Is In”: Power, Race, and Sexuality Under Capitalism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 3 (2016), 284.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.



it in her work *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* to “centre the sexed body and sexual practices as targets of colonial, national, and neoimperial power.”¹⁶ Francis looks at how normalized sexual violence results in marginalization across the intimate sphere, and disrupts the “teleological march from slavery to independence.”¹⁷ This disruption arises when all forms of space—indigenous home, familial kinship, diaspora—become “liminal spaces of vulnerability,” which circumscribe freedoms both sexual and political. While regulations and infringements upon sexuality and gender stem from the early Caribbean imperial era, in which the plantation economy was fuelled by undercurrents of sexual violence and commodification, these infringements have warped and lingered into modernity, post-modernity, and post-colonialism—sexual citizenship as a result remains a crucial though underappreciated element of full citizenship.¹⁸ Because of this continual threat to sexual citizenship, and that threat’s ubiquity even throughout a diaspora that is generations-removed from New World conquests, Francis, like Gonzalez, questions whether the diasporas of Caribbean literature can be fully liberated.

This essay will, similarly, draw on the interplay of race and gender under a modern neoliberalism which is demonstratively tainted by the scars of New World conquest and subsequent plantation economies. To do so, it analyses Diaz’s maritime and oceanic linguistic frameworks to further the scholarship above and continue to elucidate his illustrations of an anti-emancipatory ethic and its intergenerational cyclicity. I will both build on and depart from Gonzalez’s arguments by drawing on the pervasive language of naval imagery throughout the novel, both for its productive ability to access Caribbean and transatlantic colonial history broadly, and for the ways in which it is continually used to metaphorize and articulate key sexual intimacies across various *bildungsromans*. Further, the naval and oceanic system that is used to linguistically render the history of the Cabral lineage illustrates various guises of sexual citizenship and attempted entrepreneurial acting that can also be understood through the ramifications and lingering residue of original New World conquests. This linguistic residue—while not without its rebellions, which do in some ways contribute towards the decolonial aesthetic articulated by Moya and Saldivar by highlighting sites of subversion within the Cabral lineage and Caribbean history more broadly—obstructs an emancipation from the ubiquitous history of violent imperialism. I argue, further, that this specific reading of Diaz’s naval register is deeply correlated, and indeed a product and function of, Gilroy’s Black Atlantic—both through the more oblique textual instances that recall the Atlantic and other oceanic spaces as integral to the personal and global histories of the novel, but also in that situating the novel in relation to Gilroy’s theory offers further interrogations into the novel’s decolonial possibilities, or lack thereof.

Francis’s work analyses five *bildungsroman*-style Anglo-Caribbean narratives, which are frequently marked by sexual experience. Yet, as Francis points out, it is

¹⁶ Donette Francis, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–17.



the very innocuousness of the coming-of-age narrative that allows for the normalization of sexual violence within it, which is reflective of the case in *Oscar Wao*, when Beli loses her virginity to her schoolmate Jack Pujols. In Diaz's work, this scene is an early instance within which the individual's subjectivity occupies a duality between her personal *bildungsroman* and the broad geopolitical history of colonialism, realized through naval and maritime pursuits. During this scene, Beli experiences physical sexual interaction on violent terms: she describes that she is "being run through with a cutlass," wherein the use of the word "cutlass," which is an antiquated naval warfare sword, reservices Beli's physical pain such that it recalls not only Jack Pujols' present bodily violence towards her, but also the atavistic violence of forceful transcontinental colonialism (100). Hereafter, the encounter is explicitly concerned with the realm of naval strategy, and the linguistics of that strategy are rendered metaphorically through the inversion of Beli's quixotic romantic ideals. When, for instance, Jack departs immediately after taking her virginity, Beli retains unequivocal belief in their romance, and as quoted at the beginning of this work, she is caught "hook, line, and sinker" (100). The reality of Pujols' usage of Beli for teleological gain is rendered not through psychological exploration, but through naval possession, as when a fish is caught defenceless. The innocuousness of certain quirks throughout this interaction becomes significant under the broader lens of global violence perpetuated by maritime pursuits, such as, for instance, the image of Pujols' pants "puddled" on the floor (100). The "puddle" can be substantiated when understood as synecdoche, a small representative part, of a wider system. The puddle is not itself a reckonable force, but the gravity of its oceanic source affords the term a transcontinental duality beyond its immediate description.

Monica Hanna uses a similar perspective to suggest that although the story of the specific Cabral family may not appear broad or historical due to its focuses on the romantic exploits of various characters, "these seemingly private matters that traditionally lie outside of the realm of history in fact tie to the public life of the nation."¹⁹ Although Hanna's read of the use of "nerd" genres and terminology throughout the book yields a different argument than that posited here through oceanic terminology—Hanna argues that the novel rewrites and reinscribes a new history of the Dominican Republic through magical realism—the similar analytical process of applying broad historiography to intimate quotidian lives remains fundamental to understanding *Oscar Wao*. As such, in Beli's first intimate encounter with Jack Pujols, several naval phrases together posit the broader narrative of the Dominican Republic's history as a country not discovered, but taken and oppressed, and Pujols himself becomes a small-scale representation of that domineering oceanic history.

Although this scene occurs several chapters after the novel's beginning, it in some ways recalls and specifies Diaz's first few sentences:

¹⁹ Monica Hanna. "Reassembling the Fragments: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Callaloo* 33, no. 2 (2010), 504.



They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World (1).

As Justine McConnell points out, the *fukú* described above can be understood as a function of Gilroy's thinking, as it "so neatly maps onto the triangle of influence that Paul Gilroy theorized in *The Black Atlantic*."²⁰ McConnell's focus on the "it" of the passage, the *fukú*, defines a prominent way in which Diaz interacts with Gilroy: on a physical, almost map-like iteration of the transatlantic slave trade and its resultant passages, movements, and imports. We might, therefore, understand that the entity which carries "the screams of the enslaved" is the Atlantic Ocean itself. Its waters, likewise, are the vehicles which draw the demon into Creation, and which open the "nightmare door." An analysis of Beli's first sexual experience, as above, can also slot into McConnell's read of Gilroy's triangle of influence across the novel: Pujols, the holder of the cutlass, creator of the representative puddle, is the son of a colonel with close ties to Trujillo, and eventually Pujols himself becomes closely involved in the dictatorial regime. Analysis of Jack Pujols' role in Gilroy's theoretical Black Atlantic could in turn suggest that Pujols—who, as Dixia Ramírez notes, is a "handsome, white, wealthy boy...who clouds her judgement"—also represents another figment of the long Dominican tradition, of which Trujillo was a key agent, of a "thuggish masculinity-as-power," which lingers throughout the Post-Trujillo state.²¹ Jack Pujols' socioeconomic power, whiteness, and wealth therefore articulate a broader relationship in the Black Atlantic in which Caribbean states remain tinged by ethos of white superiority derived from colonial conquest; Jack, as a representation of both the Trujillian tradition and the brutal history of the Atlantic, is a function of the broader issue throughout the novel: the personal is political, and the intimate is transatlantic.

Besides Pujols' representation, the scene that depicts Beli's first sexual encounter also establishes her framework as an "entrepreneurial actor," a term which Gonzalez uses to describe a Dominican womanhood that revolves around the hyper-sexualization of the female body in a "neoliberal marketplace."²² As Gonzalez points out, the marketplace boasts an uppermost stratum of a "bourgeois, heteronormative fantasy of security," a fantasy that Beli first attaches to Jack Pujols—and his wealth and high status within Dominican society—but which she consummately envisions in her relationship with the Gangster.²³ Both Jack Pujols and the Gangster retain ties

²⁰ Justine McConnell, "Myth and the Fantastic in the Work of Junot Diaz," in *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic* (2020), 240.

²¹ Dixia Ramírez. "Great Men's Magic: Charting Hyper-masculinity and Supernatural Discourses of Power in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 3 (2013), 395–386.

²² *Ibid.*, 280.

²³ *Ibid.*, 289.



with the Trujillo regime or its descendants, and both represent the *tíguere*, which Ramírez describes as a particular encapsulation of Dominican manliness, the most macho of all men.²⁴ Jack Pujols catalyses the parallel between Beli's intimate life and the colonial past of Caribbean circumnavigation, but the Gangster, Beli's second lover, epitomizes the omnipresence of the historical lens of transatlantic possession as it manifests in physical relationships. As the Gangster travels across the Caribbean and excels in "the flesh trade" of women, he understands the female body exclusively in terms of colonial commodification and historical trade strategy (121). It is noteworthy, for instance, that Cuban women "clove his heart," and that the Gangster "sucked whiskey from the navels of underage whores" in Havana, wherein "clove" and "navel" serve as homonyms for the "clove," an indigenous Moluccan spice with a history of European monopolization between the 1600s and 1800s, and "navel" as a bodily inversion of its homonym term "naval," which encompasses the linguistic system broadly. Further, that the Gangster "harbored love for Venezuela and its many long-legged mulatas" is another homonymic juxtaposition between unassuming romantic terminology, "love" with a "harbor," a manmade structure fundamental to sea trade (122). This diction exemplifies the paradoxical, but nonetheless pervasive, synonymy between personal romantic ideations and broad scale geopolitical, as well as sexual, possession, and commodification—a history fraught with violent commercialization of people and land, and which is echoed in its contemporary microcosm of the Gangster's involvement in a modern system of sexualized enslavement. For Elena Machado Sáez, the Gangster becomes, as such, one of the several "male agents of history," and specifically the history of authoritarian regimes, "whose power is derived from the violence and exploitation of female bodies."²⁵ The Gangster as a hypersexual and hyper-masculine agent of Trujillo contributes further to Sáez's means of questioning the full liberative potential of the text, for it is Yuniór-Sáez's theorized narrative dictator—who gives voice and language to extreme sexualized violence.

Although the Gangster can represent Trujillo himself, and the hypersexual masculine ethos upon which the dictator's regime was predicated, the Gangster's character is also more broadly a lens to read the ways in which Caribbean women—within both their homelands and their diasporas—are forced to operate within a marketplace bankrupt of morality, in which "even love is framed in entrepreneurial terms."²⁶ This marketplace is circumscribed further for Beli when she and the Gangster become intimate, and their entrepreneurial terms recall systems of oppression and domination within naval conquest. When Beli and the Gangster begin their relationship, Beli is fixated on the Gangster's ability to provide home ownership, amongst other material possessions. Speaking about Miami and Cuba, the Gangster says, "I'll buy you a house in both places so you can know how much I love you!" (126). This type of promise is particularly attractive to Beli because it purportedly addresses her sense of rootlessness and lack of belonging from her "Lost

²⁴ Ramírez, 394.

²⁵ Sáez, 544.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.



Years” as a child, exemplified when the Gangster describes his own childhood as marked by a lack of any familial roots, and Beli, “an orphan herself, understood profoundly” (125). Further, this lack of a sense-of-place in the Dominican Republic ignites Beli’s drive to escape the Island, her “inextinguishable longing for elsewhere” (78). This longing heightens her attraction to the Gangster’s promises, as Beli believes that the Gangster can alleviate the restrictiveness that surrounds the Dominican Republic, described as the feeling that “There was no light and a whole ocean crushing down on you” (81). This oceanic “crushing” and darkness causes Beli’s sense of “asphyxiation,” and continues the linguistic system of the ocean’s metaphorical restrictions of bodily autonomy (81). Beli’s oceanic suffocation evokes two states of liminality at once: first, the rootlessness that stems from her orphanage, and second, her restricted condition described as an “entrapment,” which feels “as though she were submerging herself in water against her will” (85). Together, these versions of restriction elicit not only the ocean as a natural danger, but also the consequential oppressions of the colonial endeavours upon it, and its legacies of both displacement and slavery. The Gangster’s guise of entrepreneurial security, then, purports to address these liminal spaces. But, as mentioned above, the Gangster’s role in a naval, neo-slavery marketplace precludes his promises, and nullifies Beli’s opportunistic visions. His revocation of Beli’s “freedom” is made complete when he inverts his promise to offer Beli a slice of his overseas real-estate, and advises her instead towards the very opposite of true ownership and sense-of-place, when he says later, “If you’re in such a rush to go to Miami, swim” (140). In doing so, the Gangster not only obstructs Beli’s material entrepreneurial potential, but does so in such a way that transcends literal materiality and thrusts Beli back within an asphyxiated and precarious oceanic position marked by exile, exclusion, and subjugation, rather than ownership and autonomy.

Beli’s association with swimming away from danger, rather than towards opportunity, places upon Beli the weight of spatial displacement, which complicates her entrepreneurial attempts to own land and material goods. Further, Beli’s lack of entrepreneurial power is intimately connected to antagonisms against her sexual freedom. An example of the intersectionality between sexual and material freedom is in the Gangster’s initial attraction to Beli, which rests on “The sexy isthmus of her waist,” which “could have launched a thousand yolas” (123). “Yola” is the Dominican colloquialism for a small, handmade boat, built by and for island escapees. It is a naval device that connotes eviction, precarious escape, and homelands that are no longer hospitable, and it is antithetical to the Gangster’s hyper-sexualized desire for “harbors” of women and land. The yola implicates a broad displacement on a national scale, but its connotation retains an individualized and sexualized quality when the yola specifically designates Beli as a beautiful commodity worthy of the Gangster’s sexual pursuit. The yola, along with the image of Beli swimming away to Miami, each illustrates different elements of citizenship, or indeed, infringements upon it. When the Gangster rhetorizes Beli’s hypothetically swimming away to the USA, or escaping on a yola, he obstructs Beli’s property ownership in the literal sense that Beli, unlike the Gangster, will not own numerous homes or assets abroad. Instead, her transcontinental experience will be one of precarious, non-entrepreneurial ventures of escape and recluse, which antagonizes her sense of legitimate



belonging, her sense-of-place, and indeed, her more literal, national citizenship. These citizenships, which are formed in part by the economic and the spatial, operate within the rhetorical framework of the Gangster's involvement in modernized, sexual enslavement, within which wealth and power designate sexual terms and gendered power imbalances. These are circumscriptions of opportunity which are by nature both sexual and economic, and both forces operate on similar terms of possession, enclosure, and the precarious distinction between material freedom and bodily entrapment. While these liminalities are rooted in Beli's experience, the language of her infringed autonomy recalls the historical infringement of a broad, geopolitical history that spans from New World imperialist conquest to precarious transatlantic evasion in modernity.

The relationship between Beli, trapped and drowning in the Dominican Republic, and the Gangster, with his property and commodities in Santo Domingo, Miami, Cuba, and beyond, can also therefore be understood as an extension of McConnell's interpretation of Gilroy's Black Atlantic within the novel. McConnell argues that Gilroy's theorem is eminent in the lives of two key characters, Oscar and Yunior, through their "movements back and forth between Santo Domingo and New Jersey."²⁷ McConnell depends on a key element of Gilroy's work, exemplified in a facet from his 1993 text: the "desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity."²⁸ While Yunior and Oscar indeed struggle with these constraints in ways that are unique to children of diaspora who must oscillate between tradition and assimilation, I would insert that Beli, especially, embodies this key desire for structural and national transcendence as articulated in *The Black Atlantic*. Her desire for transcendence, however, is sexual, physical, and national, encompassing a series of structures that are manipulated by the Gangster, and which offer both a key contemporary representation, and complication of, that particular element of Gilroy's seminal work.

As Beli's spaces become more vulnerable, and her entrepreneurial pursuits more impossible, the Gangster antithetically identifies with oceanic expansion, and one scene in particular emphasizes the proximity, and indeed the causal interdependency, of commodifying maritime colonialism with the enslaved and the vulnerable. In one of their last moments of intimacy, the Gangster touches Beli's back and is described as "Narcissus stroking that pool of his, murmuring, Guapa, guapa, over and over again. (He didn't care about the burn scares on her back: It looks like a painting of a ciclón and that's what you are, mi negrita, una tormenta en la madrugada" (127). Just as Narcissus looks into a pool only to admire his own reflection, the Gangster's gaze upon Beli conceptualizes her body not as an independent entity but as an extension of himself—as an object to be owned, then warped into a tangible material item—a painting. Indeed, that the Gangster couples Beli's beauty (guapa) with a violent oceanic phenomenon (ciclón) and a "storm in the early morning" (una

²⁷ Justine McConnell, "Myth and the Fantastic in the Work of Junot Diaz," in *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic* (2020), 244.

²⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.



tormenta en la madrugada) suggests that the very nature of his materialization of Beli is infringed with a fixation on the violent capacity of the ocean. The ferocity associated with oceanic force is importantly attributed to the Gangster directly through his speech, and is rendered more powerful in Spanish. That the ocean—in the Gangster’s characterization of it—*torments*, and that torment attaches itself physically not to the Gangster but upon Beli, illustrates the nature of power conceived through naval and maritime systems: those who capitalize on the ocean as a vehicle to harness power and torment, are not themselves marked by the aftereffects of that torment. Rather, it is the oppressed, enslaved, and commodified who carry the violent weight of colonialist endeavours, just as Beli’s body is marked by scars. This is a scar both psychological and physical that interpolates Beli’s imbalanced sexual relationship with the historical ubiquity of naval power and the contemporary actors who wield it.

Although Francis deals exclusively with the experiences of Caribbean women in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, the use of maritime and naval language in *Oscar Wao* offers a lens to understand sexual citizenship, also, in terms of the novel’s male titular character. Likewise, while Gonzalez applies the “reproductive power” of violent historical colonial subjugation to an espoused cycle between Beli and her daughter, Lola, I suggest that Beli’s son, Oscar, is also a figure within the familial cycle who is relegated to rootlessness, and suffers gendered oppressions within the systems of oceanic language.²⁹ Indeed, the language around Oscar’s experience with Ybon at the end of the novel, which leads to his loss of virginity, mimics verbatim the language that surrounds Beli’s first sexual encounter: Oscar is enamoured with Ybon “hook, line, and sinker,” just as Beli was with Jack Pujols (287). And, as in Beli’s experience with the Gangster, so too does Oscar’s obsession morph from lovesickness to entrapment. When, for instance, Oscar feels “tremendous tidings in his heart” for Ybon, which makes him want to “run over...and shackle himself to her bed,” the physical circumscription and relinquishment of both bodily and mental autonomy recall the “shackling” of slaves across the Middle Passage, whereupon the “tidings” in Oscar’s heart become menacing, compared to their apparently innocuous representation of infatuation (283).

Besides its historically imperialist overtones, Oscar’s form of oppression can also be understood through a lens of sexual citizenship that concerns the hyper-masculine ideals projected onto the male Dominican body. Oscar’s lifelong inability to succeed sexually with women is antithetical to the male Dominican ideal (*el tíguere*, exemplified by the Gangster, for instance), which augments throughout a series of failures involving Oscar’s lack of conformity to Dominican machismo. This failure obstructs Oscar’s capacity to play the metaphorical role of the conquistador inhabited by Jack Pujols and the Gangster, and instead immures him within a state of entrapment similar to that of Beli. Although Francis does not apply her understanding of sexual citizenship to the male Dominican experience, Oscar’s state of liminality evokes a vulnerable position of oppression that is rooted in sexual belongings—or attempted belongings—which paradoxically obstruct his physical and emotional

²⁹ Ibid., 287.



freedoms. The maritime language that revolves around his imprisonments imitates that of his mother, both of whom experience the overlay of oppressive naval history as it mingles with their intimate spheres.

For Oscar, the relationship between sexual citizenship and full citizenship is particularly explicit as it surrounds his status as a child of diaspora. That relationship interpolates with transnational navigation to surround the apex of Oscar and Ybon's near-sexless affair, in the chapter notably titled "Oscar At The Rubicon" (291). The chapter title can be understood beyond its common English idiom to "cross the Rubicon," or to cross to a point of no return. The idiom is derived from Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon river in order to seize Rome, a conquest which resulted in violent combat and civil war; but while Caesar's journey epitomizes naval pursuit for geopolitical power, Oscar at the Rubicon inverts its historical source in that it correlates Oscar's romantic "shackling" to the dismantlement of Oscar's own understanding of his personal citizenship. In one of the novel's most explicit correlations between maritime imagery and notions of place and belonging, Ybon's boyfriend "el capitán" is about to beat Oscar in a cane field, when Oscar tries to defend himself with, "I'm an American citizen," to which el capitán responds that so too, is he, "naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York" (295). Any notions of true citizenship, and the safety it might afford, are upended by el capitán, who "even had First World teeth" (295). Indeed, Oscar's attempt to appeal to his own citizenship is the very rhetoric that ignites el capitán's physical wrath, and immediately proceeds the cane field beating. During the beating, anatomical or literal descriptions of pain are infringed with the same language of oceanic suffocation that entrap Beli, as when Oscar has the "Breath knocked out of him so bad he honestly thought he was going to die of asphyxiation" (296). By investigating the dimensions of citizenship, and clouding the validity of naturalization, Oscar's American citizenship interferes with his sexual citizenship—or lack thereof—and operates within a similarly suffocating framework that illustrates the ocean as an oppressive and symbolic entity elsewhere in the novel.

This obfuscation of the properties of citizenship is noteworthy in and of itself, but more importantly to the system of naval language investigated here, is its manifestation in a maritime symbol with a weighted history. When Oscar's attempt to establish his Americanism fails, he is shoved into el capitán's car, from which he observes that it is "Nighttime in Santo Domingo. A blackout, of course. Even the Lighthouse out for the night" (295). This is the lighthouse of Christopher Columbus, a structure which has such a hegemonic and domineering presence across Santo Domingo that it evades the necessity of its official eponymic label in this instance, but which is more explicitly referred to just prior, when photos are recovered of Oscar "at the Columbus lighthouse, where half of Villa Duarte used to stand" (275). Dixa Ramírez reads the Columbus lighthouse in *Oscar Wao* through its occult status and supernatural essence within Dominican society. That essence, Ramírez argues, stems from the structure's material representation of hyper-masculine visions of Trujillo and his



lackeys, the purportedly “great men of Dominican society.”³⁰ On the subjective and individual level, the lighthouse’s signification of male hypermasculinity—through what Ramírez calls the “omnipotence” of distinctively patriarchal authoritarianism and extreme machismo—correlates with Oscar’s failure to subscribe to that same brand of masculinity.³¹ The lighthouse goes dark and renounces its efficacy in the instant immediately after which Oscar’s understanding of his citizenships, both literal and sexual (as they pertain to his desire for Ybon), are assaulted by a male figure, el capitán, who does encapsulate the machismo that is affiliated with the lighthouse and its imperialist, patriarchal history. The lighthouse as a naval tool, then, both services and represents a certain stratum of Dominican men, while it actively obstructs Oscar’s pursuit of love and belonging, in that it blinds him in darkness, which disorients his sense-of-place and relegates his romantic pursuits to an obscurity within which power belongs only to those with the capacity to navigate the journey.

When Oscar notices the lighthouse’s failure, the building is representative of all of Santo Domingo, which is also in a “blackout” (297). The differentiation of the lighthouse’s significance, between Oscar’s personal masculinity, and the surrounding San Domingo pueblos, holds the lighthouse up to both Oscar’s intimate struggles and a more systemic, communal crisis. As Ramírez notes, impoverished residents of San Domingo are disadvantaged by the lighthouse, since the structure—and its surrounding tourism—encroach on the resources available to its surrounding low-income neighbourhoods. In this particular scene, the lighthouse’s lack of “illuminating capacity” is connected to “the cost of many city residents’ household electricity.”³² In other words, the lighthouse’s malfunctioning has a correlative—if not purely causal—role in obstructing San Domingo residents’ access to electricity, a happening which is evidently common and predictable, given Oscar’s qualification, “A blackout, of course” (296). The lighthouse is not simply a physical embodiment of Columbus’s original voyage, but also a modern representation of the Dominican upper-class that might have a stake in celebrating Columbus-Trujillo and his lackeys, including Joaquín Balaguer, and their fictionalized descendants in the Gangster, el capitán, and Jack Pujols—who perpetuate the neo-slavery, dictatorial terms of the Island. This representation moves from the symbolic and personal sphere (in Oscar’s mind) to that of the broad community, when the lighthouse compounds socio-economic inequities within Santo Domingo. Critical to the linguistic register of the novel, of course, is the fact it is a naval structure which presupposes aid, light, and a successful journey, but which does not, in any actuality, serve postcolonial communities. Rather, it withholds and complicates even “the most basic modern conveniences,” and continues to establish the oceanic and naval realm as an oppressive

³⁰ Dixia Ramirez. “Great Men’s Magic: Charting Hyper-masculinity and Supernatural Discourses of Power in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 3 (2013), 386.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 387.

³² Dixia Ramirez. “Great Men’s Magic: Charting Hyper-masculinity and Supernatural Discourses of Power in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 3 (2013), 386.



arena which is still owned by the select, uppermost few.³³ This series of scenes descends from Oscar's shackling to the questioning both of his citizenship literal and his citizenship sexual, to a failing and obsolete maritime structure, with explicit connections to the original conquest of the New World. The original conquest leaves its shadows in modernity, wherein the success and clarity touted by a lighthouse are not only unavailable to the unpowerful, but, in terms of the building's failure, is also closely connected to the obscurity of Oscar's sense of self, citizenship, and safety.

It is important to note, however, that these affiliations between maritime elements and the Cabral family do not encapsulate the novel's exhaustion of this language system. In one notable scene that follows La Inca, Beli's aunt and stand-in mother, the power dynamic between the individual and the violent naval system is reversed. When La Inca resorts to prayer after Beli is captured by Trujillo agents due to her pregnancy with the (married) Gangster, La Inca sits alone as though "borne upon a cold tide of despair" (144). This image progresses to La Inca drifting across a vast body of water, until she almost succumbs to the flood of "growing darkness," "like a tangle of seagrass beyond the bright reef of her faith and into the dark reaches" (145). But La Inca does not succumb. Rather, La Inca hears her late husband call out, "*You must save her*" (144). When we consider the fact that La Inca's husband drowned in the Caribbean decades prior, this moment is not merely exemplary of the mystical, folkloric omnipresence of ancestral voices that surround the Cabrals. Instead, this scene can also be understood as a turn of tides, so to speak, in which the pain of oceanic force is recaptured by the individual, an inversion made more complete when La Inca's rosaries fly through her fingers "like line flying through a doomed fisherman's hands" (144). La Inca figuratively seizes, and utilizes, naval tools like fishermen's rope, and her oceanic power manifests ultimately in efforts so total that "a hurricane could have carried off the entire city" and La Inca still would not have broken her prayer (145). Heretofore, violent naval imagery has belonged to the figures of oppression: when Pujols holds the cutlass, and when the Gangster uses stormy weather to rhetorize his ownership over Beli's body.

Does La Inca's rebellion against the naval cyclicity that oppresses Beli and Oscar suggest that colonial maritime history can be reconfigured, and its power seized by its colonial subjects? This question is perhaps best addressed within the context of La Inca's subversion of the maritime system, and specifically, the result of that subversion. The scene which follows immediately after La Inca's prayer has been studied by such scholars as Tim Lanzendörfer and Josune Urbistondo, whose discussions centre around the appearance of the mythical mongoose figure, which saves Beli from death in a cane field after she is beaten by Trujillo agents. Yet the scene which proceeds the beating in the cane and the mongoose's appearance—that of La Inca's prayer—has been underestimated, despite the causal relationship between La Inca's prayer and Beli's escape. Although the agents "beat her like she was a slave," and leave Beli to die, Beli sees "for a brief instant La Inca praying in her room," and Beli's subsequent ability to revive is deemed "the Hand of the Ancestors themselves," a miracle (148). Sarah Winstein-Hibbs discusses the mongoose

³³ Ibid., 292.



miracle, and the oral tale from which it derives, as a key “site of resistance to state power,” and conceptualizes the “state” as a “neoplantation zone.”³⁴ Winstein-Hibbs uniquely argues that the mongoose is a specific vernacular device within the “ecologies of the Caribbean plantation economy,” which “allows the novel to recover suppressed histories of racial slavery.”³⁵ I argue that the same logic can be applied to the conceptualization of La Inca’s subversive maritime prayer. While the mongoose explicitly directs Beli from the cane field, Beli’s reawakening from physical torture is clearly correlated with La Inca’s unrelenting, figurative occupation of naval forces. In capitalizing on the ocean’s power to save, rather than to destroy, a naval history is briefly recaptured, and the cane field—neoplantation—becomes the locale of a new resistance.

By locating the subversive maritime prayer within a cane field, Díaz recaptures and fictionalizes a Dominican history that the seminal Latinx literary scholar, Silvio Torres-Saillant, argues is omitted from the “official platter of school textbooks” on Dominican history.³⁶ The omitted history is that of successful liberation, strength, and dignity of the formerly enslaved, a history marked by “the liberatory self-assertion of our black Eve.”³⁷ But while Díaz does briefly recapture that silenced history when he reformulates the established systems of power to allow La Inca and Beli to occupy the arena of the naval conquistador, Díaz does not write—or rewrite—in full, an omitted history of successful liberation. Perhaps the actual moment of La Inca’s ownership over the naval system of language is less important than the moment’s ephemerality. Does Beli wholly transcend neoplantationism, postcolonial remnants of colonialism, and vulnerability within her private spheres, when almost immediately after she is saved from the cane, she lays traumatized at home, “on a vast sea of loneliness, buffeted by squalls of despair”? (154).

Díaz is forthright about his fictional investigations of the possibility of “decolonial love.”³⁸ Yet, the ephemerality and the singularity of La Inca’s seizure of the naval system, amidst a lengthy familial history that is marked by oppression at the hands of that same system, lends credence to Gonzalez’s reading of the impossibility of personal and psychological decolonialism and, further, true emancipation. This argument has thusly dealt predominantly with the linguistic interaction between naval history and its mark on intimate oppressions within Dominican modernity. But the anti-emancipatory ethic within *Wao*, and the novel’s ambiguity about whether or not decolonial love is truly accessible, is perhaps best analysed against a fundamental element of decolonial imagery, which is the capacity to imagine a liberated future. As Hanna, Vargas, and Saldívar write in their introduction to *Junot Díaz And The Decolonial Imagination*, “The central feature of the decolonial imagination is its projective power, because it is oriented towards transformation, collective action,

³⁴ Sarah Winstein-Hibbs. “A Critical Regionalist Reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: Rethinking Magical Realism through Afro-Caribbean Oral Narrative.” *Melus* 44, no. 2 (2019), 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁶ Silvio Torres-Saillant. “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity.” *Calaloo* 23, no. 3 (2000), 1095.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1096.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 396.



and the restless invocation of new futurities. The decolonial imagination envisions a radically different world, a world not structured through dominance but through solidarity.”³⁹ Beli seeks that restructured world in the USA, but one important scene, which occurs decades into her diasporic experience, illustrates the true perennialism of the ramifications of naval circumnavigation upon the Cabrals. As an adult in the USA, when Beli finds a tumour in her breast, her naked body is revealed when her bra is “slung about her waist like a torn sail, the scar on her back as vast as inconsolable as a sea” (51). The shadow of the naval system is solidified by the image of Beli’s waist, which was once sexualized in terms of the Dominican “yola,” but which is now surrounded by a failed, “torn” sail, as well as the recurrent image of her burned back, a continual representation of the sea’s violence upon the body. This naval system—and, indeed, the shadow of those who use it for geopolitical gain—continues to span across Beli’s national displacement, and throughout her lineage. The violence, love, intimacy, and prayer delineated throughout this essay are discrete personal moments, but the historical compounds heavily upon the individual, and the two spheres ferment amongst one another in quiet ways until they connote final death, or final destruction, as Beli’s tumour does. In this sense, the Cabral lineage, and its various movements throughout maritime rhetoric, becomes a microcosm of the broad, geopolitical circumscription of colonial prerogative, a prerogative which scars as deeply as Beli’s childhood burn, and which can realize itself both in the language of private love and violence, and in the literal systems of transatlantic warfare and enslavement. These scenes together question the charge of full decolonial possibility even within diaspora, and instead suggest that true emancipation, along with the forms of citizenship discussed here, is perpetually marred by a history that ferments intimately, and conjures the struggle, perhaps even the futility, behind Beli’s early claim to the Gangster: “I want to be free” (134).

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³⁹ Ibid., 9.



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