

Beyond Multiculturalism: Ethnic Studies, Transnationalism, and Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao* Elisabeth Maria Mermann-Jozwiak

Abstract: This essay places Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) within the context of transnational American Studies to illustrate that the use of the transnational as a category of critique leads to a reconsideration of the accomplishments and the limitations of multiculturalism and its academic manifestation, ethnic studies. By highlighting new migratory patterns, intercultural exchanges, and inter-national dependencies, Díaz's work can be read as a response to uncritical celebrations of difference and multiculturalism's narrative of the integration of ethnic subjects. Additionally, the book's emphasis on migration, intercultural exchange, and inter-national dependencies, I argue, are central to its challenge to concepts of nationhood that persist in forming the basis of multiculturalism.

Junot Díaz opens his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with an epigraph from Derek Walcott's long poem "The Schooner 'Flight.'" The speaker, Shabine, "a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes," reflects on his Caribbean homeland as he drives to the port to ship out. In effect, his reflections constitute a critical commentary on national discourses and their attempts to contain diverse populations. Shabine's observations revolve around the deep transnational connections in the Caribbean and suggest that the racial/ethnic hybrid subject in the Caribbean, the result of the encounter of indigenous with colonial European (French, English, Dutch) and with enslaved African populations, is cast as invisible, a "nobody," a "dog." The "coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole" does not fit any pre-established ethnic categories and the value assigned to them in the nation. Shabine, who has "Dutch, nigger, and

English” in him, quite cynically concludes, “Either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.” Discussing his choice of Wolcott’s poem as an epigraph to the novel in an interview with Wajahat Ali, Díaz comments, “part of me was thinking more in a sense that there is no national definition; in other words, all national definitions have to contend with the specificity of the individual” (Ali), and he continues, “Part of it is that, clearly, there’s no greater or perhaps more alluring simplifying myth than the myth of America with a capital ‘A.’ . . . But there’s another line to that opening quote which is the same way a national definition has to struggle to incorporate the individual, it’s also possible for an individual to become a national identity” (Ali). And Díaz goes on to allude to the fetishizing of individuals such as Dominican dictator General Trujillo, a process by which the nation becomes defined through its foremost heroes and their celebrated characteristics.

My concern here is with the way in which “a national definition has to struggle to incorporate the individual.” Many nations do so by inventing racial and ethnic categories in their attempts to create cultural cohesion. In a US American context, designations such as “Mexican American,” “Asian American,” or “African American” function to delimit supposedly homogeneous communities; such an incorporation is a “struggle,” however, since it rarely ever recognizes difference within those communities. I am further concerned with the way in which the frequently used hyphenizations serve to bundle the various ethnicities under the common label “American,” thus implicitly reaffirming the boundaries of the nation. While multiculturalism has achieved the widespread acknowledgement of diverse ethnicities, multiculturalist thinking ultimately remains nation-centered. A recent essay by Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way, who suggest using the transnational as a category of critique for American Studies Scholars, addresses this concern. They argue that the deployment of the transnational acts as a disruptive force that highlights a multiplicity of cultural, social, and political flows, decentering the nation and revealing it as shot through with contradictions. The authors make a strong case for transnationalism as “a strategy for identifying the ideological work of the nation by offering a series of provocations . . . about what might be seen as self-evidently ‘national’” (637).

If transnationalism is the new vanguard in literary and cultural studies, what, then, is at stake in a shift from multicultural to transnational studies? Following Briggs et al.'s recommendation, I argue, necessarily leads to a reconsideration of the accomplishments and the limitations of multiculturalism—both in its popular version and its academic manifestation, ethnic studies. Multiculturalism, widely adopted in the US after the 1960s as an offensive against cultural and academic monoculturalism, has had a profound impact in the academy on the study of politics, society, culture, and the arts. In the 1980s and 90s “diversity” became the *mot du jour* in educational and professional circles. But recent works by authors such as Díaz who highlight contemporary migratory patterns, intercultural exchanges, and inter-national dependencies can be read as responses to uncritical celebrations of difference and multiculturalism's narrative of the integration of ethnic subjects. A focus on transnational practices in their work, which shows broad cultural, social, and even political exchanges with other nations in the hemisphere, further illustrates the limits of multiculturalism. These depictions, I argue, are central to challenging concepts of nationhood that persist in forming the basis of multiculturalism. My objective is to deconstruct the common myth that multiculturalism and its concomitant emphasis on diversity and pluralism challenge the construct of a unified and homogeneous nation. In fact, with unity as the ultimate goal, multiculturalism continues to rely on a bounded model and has not produced a rigorous critique of the nation-state. *Oscar Wao*, which is an imaginative representation of just such a critique, chronicles the de León family through multiple generations, from their residence in the Dominican Republic to their diasporic existence in the United States. The events are portrayed through the perspective of Oscar's sister's sometime-boyfriend Yunior, who draws on a multiplicity of narrative genres and stylistic registers, and whose street-smart, rapping, and profane (also at times poetic) commentary is designed to entertain the reader. The novel demonstrates that US multicultural paradigms cannot account for the increasing heterogeneity of its immigrants. Díaz also shows how an emphasis on “the specificity of the individual” more than anything else illustrates the difference *within* the supposedly homogeneous ethnic communities.

Multiculturalism's awareness and appreciation of a plurality of ethnic cultures are firmly rooted in liberal philosophy. Suggestive of this heritage are the discourses of struggles for rights, respect, representation, recognition, and inclusion.¹ These discourses are linked to the Enlightenment project of extending tolerance and democracy and are based on a model of social consensus that posits a peaceful coexistence among different peoples. Writing in 1991, literary studies scholar Gregory S. Jay expresses just such liberal values: "Today we are moving away from the myth of assimilation and into the struggle to create a *just* multicultural society that *respects* the values and practices of distinct if interdependent groups" (267; emphasis added). Like many proponents of multiculturalism, Jay links the multicultural to the democratic project by optimistically proclaiming that multicultural education is part of how democratic culture can be fashioned (266). For social and educational policymakers, the overall goal is the integration of a recognizable pool of ethnicities into the national.² This has led conservative critics of multiculturalism such as Arthur Schlesinger and Robert Bork to fear the break-up of national unity, as they "bemoan the shattering of the idea that the US is composed of 'one people'" and claim that increased emphasis on ethnicity leads to the "fragmentation, resegregation, and tribalization of American life" (Katsiaficas and Kiros 4). Proponents of multiculturalism respond to this charge by stressing the importance of the recognition of difference as an inherent good.

The liberal democratic project found reception in the curricular structures of the academy as well. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, universities in general and English departments in particular reexamined curricula and adopted a multicultural framework. In fact, writing in the early 1990s, Barbara Brinson Curiel et al. could claim: "Over the past fifteen years, one of the major developments in American Studies across the nation has been the adoption of multiculturalism as a central, if not the central, organizing principle in how to study culture in the United States" (10). Universities institutionalized area studies programs, underfunded though they may be; English Departments focused on *integrating* minority authors into the teaching of American literature and offered courses on minority cultures to counteract their marginalization

and neglect in a largely monocultural academy. The point of the project was to recognize the existence of the diverse voices and cultures that make up the US-American mosaic and to focus on their canon-reshaping potential. The dominant model of thought behind this endeavor is one of *inclusion* and *incorporation*, a gathering up of what had remained on the periphery.

Ethnic Studies programs, as an outgrowth of multicultural policy, adopted a perspective of *critical* multiculturalism, juxtaposing this approach to the popular pluralist version of multiculturalism prevalent in the US mainstream. Born out of anti-racist struggle in the post-Civil Rights era, ethnic studies situated the ethnic subject in its social and historical contexts. According to philosopher David Theo Goldberg, this approach was rebellious and transformative in that it challenged the status quo in literary and other academic disciplines. He argues for multiculturalism's potential to resist the reductive imperatives of monoculturalism, whose history is "contemporaneous with melting-pot assimilationism, the prevailing standard underlying politics concerning ethn racial immigration and relations in the United States" (4). Goldberg, who considers claims to homogeneity as inherently suspect, finds the supposition of a radical heterogeneity, one that is "critical, insurgent, polyvocal, heteroglossial, and anti-foundational" (19–20), more realistic. Along these lines, for the study of literature, Michael Hames-García proposes a critical multiculturalism that teaches conflict. Multicultural pedagogies, he argues, have the potential to initiate rigorous criticism and radical cultural revision (274). Scholars who embrace this approach do not resort to universal experiences but examine them as socially, historically, and politically constructed.

The accomplishments of critical multiculturalism lie in its anti-racist advocacy and its exploration of "the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively" (5), as David Palumbo-Liu puts it with passing reference to multicultural pluralism. But its examination of group identities as they were formed through common experiences in the United States affords only a narrow scope in which the US remains the reference point and cross-border

connections remain secondary. I would also point out that the semantic shift from “melting-pot assimilation”—referring to the adoption of mainstream values and behaviors—to “integration”—referring to the achievement of equal participation in society through legal and political structures that assure equal access and the incorporation of strangers as new members in the national community—may have been more theoretical than practically successful.³ Integration still suggests the presence of norms of acceptable behaviors and actions, as well as a shared set of beliefs. These norms, as Randolph Bourne has declared in his early twentieth-century critique of the melting pot myth, and as the contemporary English-Only movement demonstrates all too well, revolve around Anglo-American values and practices. It is too soon to declare the end of normative assimilation; as long as the nation-state is alive and well—and social science researchers suggest that it is—its focus on community, social cohesion, and unity make assimilation necessary. This process of making alike, described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as a tool nations use to counter heterogeneity, is ultimately a “declaration of war on foreign substances and qualities” (158). Its state-sanctioned purpose is to reduce division, to promote uniformity, and to enforce homogeneity (153–54). Synonymous with absorption, incorporation, and conversion, assimilation is not self-administered change, and the transformation is necessarily uni-directional. According to Bauman, the nation-state responds with cultural crusades to emerging gaps between the uniformity inherent in the idea of the nation and the practical heterogeneity of cultural forms within it that constitute challenges to it. As a consequence, individuals may be compelled into the public acknowledgment of their allegiance to the nation and the private practice of ethnic traditions.⁴

On the surface multiculturalism seems to favor “abandoning the myth of homogeneous and monocultural nation-states and recognizing rights to cultural maintenance and community formation” (Stephen Castles, qtd. in Vertovek 3), allowing for the preservation of distinct traits of ethnic communities. But I concur with Steven Vertovek’s assessment that multiculturalism leaves unchallenged the expectation of a group’s attachment to one nation. It allows for the expression of difference only

within the framework of a common civic culture.⁵ The very emphasis on cultural identity and recognition by the majority society has ultimately prevented effective challenges to the nation-state. Though its relations with the nation-state may at times be strained, in the end multiculturalism functions to *contain* diversity and to extend instead the idea of “imagined community” (Anderson), which in a US context would mean the establishment of a cohesive Americanness. As a consequence of this relation to the nation-state, the multicultural model of inclusion is inherently inward-looking and bounded, with an emphasis on the domestic, while outside forces receive little recognition.

With national unity still the ultimate goal, the nation-state has become rather adept at co-opting multiculturalism to contain its diverse populace and even heterogeneity itself. It does so, according to Arjun Appadurai, by seeking “to monopolize the moral resources of community, either by flatly claiming perfect coequality between nation and state, or by systematically museumizing and representing all the groups within them in a variety of heritage politics that seem remarkably uniform throughout the world” (39). The state inventories diverse cultures; it heralds the preservation of distinct traits of ethnic communities, as long as all have the same attachment to the nation-state. As Asian American critic Lisa Lowe argues, multiculturalism “aestheticizes ethnic differences” (9) and thereby fictively reconciles contradictions of immigrant marginality. It is “a discourse designed to recuperate conflict and difference through inclusion” (42).⁶

Recent Latino/a literature, as a site of resistance to official representations of ethnicity and agent of highlighting what Appadurai calls a “disjunctive global culture,” quite effectively mirrors the theoretical critique of a pluralist and celebratory multiculturalism that leads to the reification and aestheticization of ethnicity. It also draws attention to the limits of ethnic studies discourses in its depictions of cross-national exchanges. Specifically, *Oscar Wao* engages in a dialogue with narratives of multiculturalism by portraying cultural flows that reach beyond the borders of the nation. Instead of an identity quest that takes the form of a single journey in which ethnic subjects seek to locate their cultural roots and find empowerment in the homeland, Díaz depicts the de

Léon family's cross-border movements from the US to the Dominican Republic and back as regular and as circular. The family's migratory routes are due to both political and personal circumstances and shed light on the conflicting (neither incorporative, assimilative, or integrative) allegiances this shuttling brings about. In addition, Díaz's excavation of Dominican history, specifically of the brutality and hemispheric reach of the US-backed Trujillo regime, deflates any recourse to ordinary narratives of an idealized past; this is a nation that centrifugally expelled and dispersed its population into the diaspora. At the same time, he demonstrates, this is a nation that centripetally absorbed cultural influences from all other continents. These global flows make a singular vision of homeland impossible: the Caribbean is a busy plurality of peoples, races, and cultures; it is in constant process of creation and re-creation.

At first glance, the family's journeys to the Dominican Republic seem to perfectly fit into narrative patterns associated with multiculturalism: ethnic subjects residing in the US travel—African Americans to the Southern US or to Africa, Mexican Americans to Mexico—in search of roots that lead to a recovery of the individual's cultural identity. But such paradigms, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian explains in her discussion of Chicana author Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's novel *Paletitas de guayaba*, have the tendency to “speak to Mexican ancestry only as a way of figuring a distant past from the position of the United States” (280).⁷ The construction of a homeland is largely imaginary and may lead to a cultural nationalism that searches for origins (elsewhere), specifically in a mythic and unchanging past. Such a construction also helps shape the very markers of ethnicity that, through repeated use over time, reify into icons that the state can appropriate and co-opt.⁸ Read within a multicultural paradigm, the sojourn abroad is inevitably a temporary one, concluded with a sure return trip “home,” to the United States, symptomatic of the characters' affirmation of national belonging.

Díaz both engages and subverts this trope by placing migratory travel within the context of what James Clifford has termed “traveling cultures.” Predicated on the assumption that mobility is part of the human condition, Clifford points to practices of crossing and interac-

tion that question the supposed rootedness of cultural elements. By locating the narrative center of the novel in the folkloric concept of *fukú*, a generational curse that haunts the family, Díaz seems to bind Oscar's story into a framework that originates in the Dominican Republic. But he complicates its roots in island lore by relating its arrival in the Caribbean to the specific historical conditions of the Conquest; as the narrator comments, *fukú* is "the Curse and the Doom of the New World," caused by European colonization, "the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (1). It is in itself a transnational phenomenon which came to the continent from Africa, "in the screams of the enslaved" (1), as part of the cultural flows Paul Gilroy outlines in his study of the Black Atlantic. Díaz also frames Oscar's story in terms of other transatlantic connections, designating the Fall of the House Cabral "the local version of the House Atreus" (152). Like Tantalus of the Greek myth, who fed his son to the Gods as a test of their omniscience, the Cabral patriarch Abelard, Oscar's grandfather, mingled with the Gods, in this case, the associates of Dominican dictator General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, which directly results in a series of family tragedies: resisting Trujillo's demand to bring his wife and daughters to one of the General's gatherings, Abelard dies after languishing in prison for years. Employing such multiple frames of reference and ultimate deferrals of origin, Díaz focuses his readers' attention on the extended Caribbean, with roots spreading far into the eastern United States and across the Atlantic to Europe and Africa, crisscrossing the routes of colonizers and colonized.

Díaz's emphasis on "traveling cultures" is similarly evident in the dexterity with which Yunior handles narrative modes, juxtaposing science fiction with Magic Realism, the latter a form that is now commonly associated with Latin America but that can be attributed to German critic and historian Franz Roh, who coined the term in a 1925 book depicting post-Expressionist European art.⁹ Gabriel García Márquez, one of the foremost practitioners of Magic Realism, emphasizes the global and multiple origins of the style: "In the Caribbean, to which I belong, the unbridled imagination of the black African slaves got mixed up with the beliefs of the pre-Colombian natives and then with the fantasy of

the Andalusian” (qtd. in Hart 114). The recurring appearances of the mongoose, which shows itself to both Oscar and his mother Beli in moments of life-threatening danger, further underline the migratory nature of culture. A weasel-like creature introduced to the Caribbean via India by sugar cane farmers, the mongoose is believed to be an ally of man and “one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers,” as it has accompanied humanity from Africa, the narrator explains in a footnote (151).

Díaz goes to great lengths to show that the curse was, and remains, deeply embedded in historical and political realities. As Anne Garland Mahler argues, the novel introduces *fukú* as a metaphor for “the perpetuation of colonial hierarchies in the Dominican Republic” (120) and, I would argue, beyond, extending into the diaspora. The doom brought on by Abelard leads to the attack of Oscar’s mother Beli and her near-killing in a canefield by Trujillo’s secret police when the dictator’s sister finds out that Beli has had an affair with her husband. Decades later, the doom finds Oscar, who is first wounded and later shot dead in the very same canefields by military police, whose attitudes and behaviors suggest the remnants of the regime. The men, according to the narrator, were born too late for Trujillo’s army but would have squarely belonged there. Here is Yunior describing the man who orders Oscar’s death. Called the *capitán*, he is the boyfriend of Ybón Pimentel, with whom it is Oscar’s misfortune to fall in love:

One of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to. Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away. He’d been young during the Trujillato, so he never got the chance to run with some real power, wasn’t until the North American invasion that he earned his stripes. Like my father, he supported the U.S. Invaders, and because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists, he was launched—no, vaulted—into the top ranks of the military police. (294)

Simultaneously rejecting recourse to originary narratives or the essentialist identity constructions that may emerge from multicultural

discussions and countering the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2)¹⁰ in standard US teaching of History, Díaz’s historical excavations show how the transnational always infuses the domestic. The text specifically highlights the period of the dictatorship of General Trujillo, who ruled the country from 1930 until his assassination in 1961 and who is famous for his genocide of Haitians in 1937 in an event that came to be known as *el corte* (the Cutting). The novel lingers on the fact that his administration was backed by the United States and focuses on the regime of terror he, supported by his secret police, unleashed on the Dominican population, producing a flood of refugees to the US. Díaz also shows the regime’s reach across the Americas through its trade and cultural contacts with Cuba (before the Revolution), Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, and the US, and the ways in which the General’s legacy survived his assassination. This history is supported by lengthy pseudo-academic footnotes, often tongue-in-cheek and designed to read more like commentary than scholarship, illustrating Trujillo’s brutality by focusing on major figures in his administration, its effects on Dominican cultural and social institutions, and its aftermath. History does not function as the backdrop for the plot; instead, the story of the family is deeply interwoven with the history of the nation. As Díaz explains in an interview with Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, “I never understood history without making it personal” (905). Three times the house Cabral is victimized by violence that can be traced to the regime, and Beli’s experiences with it directly lead to her exile in the US. This carefully elaborated historical frame, this “surfeit of history” (Scott), undercuts the narrative of the mythical country of origin. Furthermore, Díaz points to the ways in which histories that form no more than a footnote in standard US History textbooks gain new valence in transnational contexts—they explain the aftermath of trauma that haunts immigrant communities that settle in the United States.

Disenchanted with his life in the US, Oscar reverses his mother’s journey when he decides to pursue Ybón. His return to the Dominican Republic is described as a homecoming of sorts, but Díaz complicates a multicultural roots narrative by registering distinctly unidyllic impres-

sions and questioning Oscar's sense of belonging. The following brief excerpt from a pages-long inventory of the sounds, sights, and smells of Santo Domingo depicts Oscar's initial and quite unsentimental reactions to the capital city:

The beat-you-down heat was the same, and so was the fecund tropical smell that he had never forgotten, that to him was more evocative than any madeleine, and likewise the air pollution and the thousands of motors and cars and dilapidated trucks on the roads and the clusters of peddlers at every traffic light (so dark, he noticed, and his mother said, dismissively, *Maldito haitianos*) and people walking languidly with nothing to shade them from the sun and the buses that charged past so overflowing with passengers that from the outside they looked like they were making a rush delivery of spare limbs to some far-off war and the general ruination of so many of the buildings as if Santo Domingo was the place that crumbled crumpled concrete shells came to die. (273)

The heat, the pollution, the crumbling buildings, and, as the narrator emphasizes in a refrain-like repetition, "the mind-boggling poverty" (277), all contradict the sense of a return to an idyllic place of departure. With its paratactic syntax, this list represents the bombardment of the senses with a multitude of impressions. It might read like a tourist's description were it not for the reference to the madeleine, recalling the object that famously triggers Swann's memory in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). From the applause when the plane lands to waking up to the roosters and being called "Huáscar" by family and friends, Oscar's perceptions are strangely familiar to him, a paradox that signifies the initial jolt of recognition of something Oscar had forgotten, of customs he didn't know he remembered. The Dominican Republic is both home and not home, and the tension between belonging and not belonging is always clear. While Beli, in a little girl's voice, tells La Inca, "Madre, I'm home" (274), Oscar is aware of the whispered insistence "that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*" (276).

Not only does Oscar's reverse migration resist the multicultural roots narrative, the novel also resists national paradigms of immigration and assimilation through its depiction of the de León family's circuitous migratory routes and continuing transnational practices. The above-mentioned trip that brings Oscar and his family back to Santo Domingo is merely one in a series. After the reluctant Beli Cabral leaves the island at age sixteen subsequent to her near-death experience at the hands of Trujillo's henchmen, she becomes a refugee, thinking of the Dominican Republic as "the Island of our eviction" (77), and begins her diasporic existence in New Jersey. After her marriage, however, Belicia de León shuttles back and forth for summer visits or to drop off and pick up her children. Her own and her family's multiple border crossings are reflective of the practices of many transnational migrants. The novel emphasizes the regularity with which this movement takes place and provides a broader context for the de Léons' actions when Díaz writes, "every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can. . . . Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home!" (271). So much of the narrative is in fact set in and dwells on the Dominican Republic—the story of Lola's year-long stay with La Inca, the flashbacks to Beli's youth in the country, and Oscar's multiple returns in his quest for love—that it demonstrates the continuing hold of the island on its population abroad. Oscar's story does not conclude with a return trip to the United States; it *ends* instead in the Dominican Republic. After embracing his Dominican identity, he finally finds acceptance in the form of love (or at least sex) before facing his certain death sentence. In an inversion of the final lines of Joseph Conrad's narrative that reveal Kurtz's insight into the Congo, Oscar's final letter to the US ironically ends with "The beauty! The beauty!" (335).

As we have begun to see, in so many ways *Oscar Wao* is an imaginative representation of the theoretical insights of social science theory on transnational migration. For over a decade now, scholars, perhaps most prominently Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, have called for a revision of linear migration models that are closely linked to the national myth of melting pot assimilation.¹¹ This

paradigm assumes that immigration signifies a permanent rupture with the home country and that movement proceeds in a uni-linear direction, to the effect that over time immigrants will uniformly transfer their allegiances to the host country.¹² But few modern immigrants abandon their homelands altogether; their movement is more appropriately described as circular, and their attachments to their countries of origin remain deep. They continue to shuttle between countries and straddle two or more worlds. Díaz's novel is a fictional representation of what Roger Rouse has called "involvements across space" insofar as the de Léons engage in practices that demonstrate their continuing commitment to the home country and that resist a uniform and singular allegiance to the host country. These practices include sending the children to live with family abroad. When Oscar is in his senior year of high school, Beli sends him and his sister Lola to spend the summer with La Inca, her father's cousin, who also raised her. Earlier, Lola spent a year with La Inca and went to school in Santo Domingo after she'd run away from home. Sending the children back may function as an intervention in their education or as disciplinary action; it nonetheless demonstrates the way in which foreign-born immigrants maintain contacts with their homeland and the difficulty of creating a sense of home in the new country.¹³ The novel also contains references to the remittances sent home by many immigrants. La Inca's house, for instance, is "the house that Diaspora had built" (279). The family's town of origin, Baní, is "supported by an endless supply of DoYos who've laid claim to most of Boston, Providence, New Hampshire" (77). These practices lead to transformations in both the place of travel and the place of departure; different locales develop in a relationship of interdependence. In an interview with Ilan Stavans, Díaz stresses these effects: "Those in the diaspora haven't only changed as a result of their departure; they changed fundamentally the place they departed from" (50).¹⁴ Elsewhere, discussing changes he observed on the island, Díaz notes, "the United States looms larger than Santo Domingo in everybody's conversation and imagination and space" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 597–98).

The de León family's practices, then, spill over the borders of the nation. Beli and her children engage in movement where no arrival

or return is ever final, and multiple and reverse migrations occur on a regular basis. They maintain family and friendship networks in both countries, experience fluency and potential alienation in two languages, and find comfort and dislocation on both sides. *Oscar Wao* makes clear that transnational life is not confined to first-generation immigrants, as traditionally assumed, but persists through generations, aided by increased means of communication and transportation.¹⁵ The reach of the Dominican Republic extends to immigrant's children, and even their children's children. Yunior is quite sure that Isis, Lola's daughter, has inherited the curse: "Nothing ever ends," he says, echoing Dr. Manhattan's response to Adrian at the end of *Watchmen*. This portrayal corresponds to the findings of Robert Courtney Smith, whose study *Mexican New York* examines an immigrant community from Ticuani, Mexico. For the people from this town, "Ticuani is not just a family story passed down through generations, as are so many Americans' links with their ancestral lands, but rather a lived experience" (202).

Finally, Díaz also draws attention to the New Jersey immigrant community, refusing to portray it as the homogeneous and cohesive social construct that narratives of the presence of easily-labeled multi-cultures in the US might suggest. Ethnic categories created in the 1970s artificially constructed minority populations and their heritage, projecting a sense of unified communities.¹⁶ Díaz focuses instead on the internal divisions based on the performance of race and gender within the Dominican diaspora. In his interview with Ali, Díaz comments on his preoccupation with difference. He explains, "I think there are credible ironies in that even in communities that are ostracized by the larger, mainstream community there are people within these very communities who are ostracized for what seems to be completely arbitrary reasons. . . . I think part of what I was interested in as a writer was sort of exploring the internal tyranny of a community" (Ali). Adolescent and young adult Oscar's non-compliance with Dominican norms of masculinity set him apart, as does his physical appearance—he is very dark-skinned and hopelessly overweight—and the strategies he has developed to cope with rejection—his extreme nerdiness based on a complete immersion in "the genres." Oscar constantly has to assert himself: "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. ‘You’re not Dominican.’ And he said, over and over again, ‘But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy’” (49). Oscar’s experiences of loneliness and alienation from his surroundings, resulting in an insistence on his Dominicaness and a need to reaffirm his inclusion in the national group, bring to the surface the tyranny of hegemony that Díaz alludes to, to the point that it makes Oscar suicidal. While it has been suggested that Oscar’s alienation resembles the outsider status of the typical hero of “American” fiction, I regard such a reading as a form of repatriation or re-nationalization of Oscar from a US-centered perspective.¹⁷ The construction of “American” fiction in such tropes tends to be reductive; instead, Oscar’s malaise is attributable to his own and his family’s experiences of diaspora, uprooting, and displacement. His malaise further provides testimony to the effects of diasporic communities’ attempts to define themselves in connection with their homeland.

Oscar Wao thus posits an alterity that cannot be subsumed or absorbed by the homogenizing practices of the nation-state, either through aestheticization (Appadurai) or pragmatic incorporation. It also demonstrates that ethnic categories created in the 1970s artificially constructed minority populations and their cultures, projecting a sense of unified communities existing within a bounded nation-state. These discursive constructions cannot contain—and render invisible within the discourse of the nation—groups such as the Afro-Peruvians that are Oscar’s mother’s boarders. Through referring to such communities, as well as by focusing on the differences *within groups*, Díaz rejects isomorphic identities and questions notions of multiculturalism, nation-state, and imagined (diasporic) communities. The novel further depicts the deep links between ethnic subjects in the US and “the Americans of the Americas” (Chabram-Dernersesian 275). Such persisting hemispheric interdependencies require that we venture outside of the boundaries of multicultural analyses to escape the confines of the nation-state in a search for new paradigms. Reading from a transnational perspective, then, *Oscar Wao* indicates that a sustained questioning of the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of the nation-state is necessary and that we should

embrace models that focus on exploring the relations among nations. The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group incisively questions the nation-state's search to delimit its boundaries. The group asks, "What are the boundaries of Latin America if, for instance, we consider New York the largest Puerto Rican metropolis and Los Angeles the second-largest Mexican metropolis?" (8). They continue to describe the interpenetration of traditionally distinct categories in the following manner: "in the new situation of globality, the signifier *Latin American* itself now refers also to significant social forces *within* the United States, which has now become the fourth- or fifth-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world" (6).

In response to the question I posed at the beginning—what is at stake in this shift to the transnational?—I suggest that if we use the transnational as an analytical tool, one that presents a rupture in nation-based thinking and draws attention to the interpenetration of the domestic and the international, we have to question the foundations of multiculturalism itself, as long as its objectives remain the integration and incorporation of ethnic subjects, objectives that hold out the promise of equality within a national framework. I further suggest that ethnic studies' rootedness in multiculturalism, while providing a corrective to monoculturalism as well as a state-sponsored multicultural pluralism, limits its scope when it examines group identities that are forged in the US only rather than within broader hemispheric and global contexts. Ethnicity that gains its valence as difference/otherness in a dominant culture and that refers to shared social practices remains narrowly circumscribed as "a consciousness of exclusion and subordination" (Yu 103). When situated within a transnational framework—and with an estimated 160 million people living outside of their country of birth or citizenship such an enterprise has gained some urgency—studies of ethnicity investigate identity in multiple, intersecting, and perhaps conflicting contexts.¹⁸ Not only do such studies focus on how identities are shaped when individuals encounter pressures to assimilate, exploitative working conditions, racism, and alienation in the host country, they also consider the demands, norms, networks of relationships, connections, and interdependencies in which individuals are embedded that

are both historical and contemporary and that reach across geographical spaces. Studies of ethnicity situated in a transnational framework analyze how signifiers such as “Dominican-American” circulate and operate both within a US and within a Dominican context. They might examine Oscar’s sense of simultaneous belonging and not belonging along different axes of identity—the meanings assigned to his gender performance, his race, and his social class in both Dominican and US frameworks. They might also juxtapose the alienation of the classic US American protagonist and that of transnational characters, thus providing a complement to traditional articulations of “American” literature.¹⁹

Díaz’s text, as we have seen, is both commentary and performance; it documents as it invents. The above examination of the novel has shown, I hope, that literature provides a window that is more than a creative intervention into national(ist) discourses, simply mirroring or lagging behind theoretical (social science) articulations of transnational practices. With its unique ability to cross spatial and temporal boundaries, literature transports us to and connects us with disparate spatial frameworks. It traces individual acts of meaning-making that function as unofficial records of memory and community with respect to transnational processes. It is also able to depict alternate, not necessarily nation-based forms of community and identity. In the words of Paul Giles, author of *The Global Remappings of American Literature*, “one of the most interesting aspects of contemporary American literature is how it represents ways in which these pressures of deterritorialization are being internalized and understood affectively” (19). It is precisely this affective dimension that is needed to complement a social science approach to migration and transnationalism.

Notes

- 1 For examples of the discourse on rights see Kymlicka and Benhabib; on respect, see Jay; on representation, see Palumbo-Liu; and on recognition, see Taylor, Habermas, and Appiah.
- 2 On the link between multiculturalism, democracy, and education, see Mitchell.
- 3 Integration has long been stressed over assimilation in studies of immigration in Europe, and governments have pondered how to integrate, say, the Turkish minority into German society when what they really mean is assimilate. This

explains the widespread opposition to building mosques, or girls wearing headscarves, all outward manifestations of Turkish difference.

4 See also Goldberg, who says that minorities, in effect, are “in private, ethnic, in public, American” (6).

5 See also Soutphommasane, who argues that this is the case for Australia and Canada.

6 See also Hattori, who provocatively points to the state's co-optation of the multicultural as a strategy of consolidation. He declares:

The nationalist frame to which ethnicity as an interpretive social model is usually confined not only is rooted in the conventions of twentieth-century American sociology, but also forms the basis of the American cultural pedagogy known as “Ethnic Studies.” The American conception of ethnicity is structurally narcissistic and, to the extent that meaningful and sincere social exchange and intercourse between “dominant” and “minor” Americans is idealized, onanistic in that the desirable ethnic other is simply a colorized fantasy of its own body: subjects who are obedient, assimilable and, outside of phenotypical and chromatic variation, essentially uniform within an orderly and rational civil society. As a project thus endorsed in the social mission statements of corporations, government agencies, and educational institutions, the implicit goal behind the articulation of ethnicity and its more common catch-phrase “diversity” is to neutralize the politically and socially disruptive potential of racial, ethnic, and other cultural differences in ways that inevitably contradict the processes of difference and hybridity in the world. In order to stabilize capitalist and democratic societies, the institutions of capital and the nation-state commit themselves to a permanent civilizing mission by any means necessary, even if that includes embracing and idealizing multiculturalism and multiracialism. (216–17)

7 Castillo and Córdoba also comment that “for many Chicano/a writers and thinkers [borderlands theory represents] the imaginative return to a metaphorically conceived Mexican/Latin American cultural tradition which serves as a source of empowerment; this tradition is accessed more often through memory and secondary texts than through actual visits to the Mexican side of the geopolitical boundary line” (18).

8 Chicano nationalism, for example, is evident in the construction and return to the mythic Aztlán, homeland of the Chicano people in the Southwestern United States, or in the writings at the beginning of the Chicano movement, including Villarreal's *Pocho* (1956) or Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, and Gonzales's “Yo Soy Joaquín.” Gonzales's poem celebrates Chicano identity and locates it through the speaker's series of identifications with historical and mythical figures such as Cuauhtémoc, the Aztec warrior killed by Cortés; Nezahualcōyotl, leader of the Chichimecas; and Pancho Villa, one of the leaders in the Mexican Revolution.

- Gonzales's canonizing list of heroes provides further examples of what Díaz calls the fetishizing of individuals in attempts to define a nation.
- 9 It is noteworthy that science fiction, which provides an alternative community for Oscar, also to a large extent deals with the assimilation of species/races, intersecting in this way with the novel's exploration of national and cultural origins.
 - 10 In an interview with Stavans, Díaz explains that his stories start out "with silence. And it's usually a silence around an issue, a silence around a time in my life, a silence about certain kinds of relationships . . . I like to put my hand through forbidden spaces" (47). On the novel as providing an alternative historiography through its assemblage of fragments and use of a multiplicity of narrative genres that resist the univocality of official history, see Hanna.
 - 11 For similar critiques of the study of migration and immigration in the social sciences, see also Itzigsohn et al. and Smith.
 - 12 This paradigm, I argue, is based on classic tales of European migration, such as those of Antin, Cahan, and Hoffman. I would also like to stress that non-linear migratory paths are not new phenomena. In her comparison of early and late twentieth century immigration to the US, sociologist Foner demonstrates that transnational practices, including return migration, have been present for at least a century, though circular movements have certainly been intensified due to new technologies in transportation and communication.
 - 13 This is one of the practices Rouse also lists (44).
 - 14 Sending remittances is one widespread practice through which people stay connected across national territories. According to World Bank estimates, in 2006 the global total of remittances was \$300 billion dollars, one third of which came from the United States. In 38 countries, remittances accounted for 10% of the gross domestic product (DeParle). See Smith's study of Ticuani migrants to New York City, where he argues that remittances may create a dependency of the local economy on the immigrants while at the same time giving immigrants a voice in local affairs. Other effects of outmigration, Smith notes, are an aging population and increased gang violence. For the impact of remittances, see also Vertovek.
 - 15 Friedman notes the ways in which technology has facilitated and intensified this interconnectedness through the building of virtual communities (261).
 - 16 Schiller et al. argue that despite these insights social science paradigms continue to conceptualize populations as divided into discrete, tightly bounded groups and explain persisting identities as products of forces contained within separate nation-states (16). Such bounded concepts—of tribe, ethnic group, nation, society, culture—they claim, can limit the ability of researchers to analyze transnational phenomena (6). See also Oboler (26–28). Similar questions can be raised regarding the cohesiveness and unity with respect to the term "diaspora," the scattering of a community across nation-state territories. According to Friedman: "diaspora involves migration—but specific kinds of migration that set in motion particular longings for a lost homeland. Diaspora is migration plus loss,

desire, and widely scattered communities held together by memory and a sense of history over a long period of time" (268). The assumption is that the community is bound together by this sense of loss. The Dominican diaspora, Díaz indicates however, developed an imaginary that represses difference.

17 This analysis was suggested to me at a recent meeting of the American Literature Association in San Francisco by an anonymous audience member.

18 See Brettell for a discussion of this urgency.

19 For an insightful analysis of narrative treatments of multiple belonging, see Heredia.

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