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Significance of Hair as a Means of Racial Identity in the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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Racism and racial self-hatred are deeply embedded into Dominican culture. From the time of Spanish Colonization, a correlation between race and status remains evident as well as a vehement denial of African-ness. Along with this fierce denial exists the acceptance of false European-ness, as Junot Diaz highlights throughout his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Oscar, as well as the rest of his family, lives in racial limbo. The novel contains underlying allusions to slavery and African culture emphasized by the constant denial of African roots in Dominican culture, heavily mirrored by the keen attention to hair. Junot Diaz uses hair as a tool to enforce the issue of racial identity in the Dominican Republic as witnessed throughout the novel.

The history of the Dominican Republic exposes a continuous racial struggle. In order to understand the racial undertones in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it is important to analyze the history that influences it. The Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti - an ethnically African-Creole nation with a turbulent history full of struggle with its nation to the east. The first African slaves arrived on the island in 1503, marking the beginnings of a racial controversy that would stand the test of time. From 1822 to 1844, Haiti occupied the entire island, freeing all slaves in Spanish Hispaniola.

The Spanish colony had once been the center of the New World. Santo Domingo (the current capital of the Dominican Republic) contained a thriving port and had powerful economic influence. African slaves played a major role in the development of Hispaniola, majorly responsible for the construction of Santo Domingo. With all gold deposits exhausted, the Spanish turned their attention to Central America following Hernan Cortes' expedition, leaving the eastern portion of Hispaniola defenseless against Haitian occupation.

In 1865, after a brief period of Haitian occupation and later Spanish rule, independence of the Dominican Republic was restored. The young nation struggled economically and socially, causing intervention from other nations and finally American installment of a military government in 1916 that ended in 1924. The most infamous ruler of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, came into power in 1930. *El Jefe* (The Boss) ruled until his assassination in May of 1961. His reign is one of the darkest times in Dominican history- economically, socially, and racially.

Haunted with the memory of Haitian occupation, Trujillo led a brutally hateful reign against Haitians and blacks. He imposed a racially driven ethnic cleansing of the Dominican Republic backlashing against impurities such as Dominicans of mixed heritage, Haitians, and black Dominicans. On October 2, 1937 Trujillo announced a "remedy" to "fix" supposed conflict at the Haitian-Dominican border. The days that follow became known as the Parsley Massacre. It is unknown exactly how many Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans fell under the oppressive slaughter of the *Trujillato*. The numbers vary; Haitian authorities have estimated a body count of up to 12,000. Other authorities' reports range from about 8,000 to 30,000 with 20,000 being the major consensus (Feiser, "Hispaniola: Trujillo's Voodoo Legacy"). Regardless, the undeniable nature of this event haunts the history of both nations, as well as the characters of Oscar Wao.

The historical racist conflict in the Dominican Republic heightened during the Trujillo dictatorship plays a significant role in the character development in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. This context lays a foundation for the sociocultural mentality of race and "the racial implications attending hair culture [which] shape both the racial perceptions held by the characters and those held about the characters" (Kunsa 212-213). Junot Diaz uses hair as a means of identifying race, class, and beauty throughout the book. Maritza, one of Oscar's young loves and a friend of Lola's, is described as "long-haired and prissy," a true beauty (Diaz 13). Oscar

chooses her over Olga, an unattractive Puerto Rican who fails to meet the imposed standards of beauty and who is despised by his mother. Maritza's dark, luscious hair gives her an air of intoxicating beauty. Likewise, Lola appears to be a beauty. She has a "thin nose and straightish hair" that is the envy of all the *morenas* (black girls) (Diaz 15). Another one of Oscar's loves, Jenni, was described in such a light. Her jet-black, straight, and Egyptian-esque hair caught Oscar's attention immediately (Diaz 182). The length and texture of their hair plays up their physical beauty. Their European qualities are presented as worthy of envy to those of a more ethnic lineage, implying a more elevated sense of aesthetic appeal than their kinked roots.

Trujillo initiated a process of "Dominicanization" in the Dominican Republic. He created an ideal of what Dominican society should be—paralleling his own beliefs in skin bleaching and white beauty. He created social barriers, imposed racist ideologies on his people, and went so far as to blame Haitian voodoo for the evil in the Dominican Republic (a concept parallel to the theme of *fukú* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*) and therefore prohibited its practice, "a crime punishable by two years in prison and/or deportation (Feiser, "Hispaniola: Trujillo's Voodoo Legacy")." Trujillo detested all traces of blackness or African-ness in the Dominican culture and blood-line. During his three decades of rule, the ideologies he imposed upon his people became profoundly embedded in Dominican society. Trujillo's dictatorship left behind a trace of omnipresence that still affects Dominicans to this day.

Racial tensions have caused much conflict within the social infrastructure of the nation. A vast, complex social hierarchy based on racial heritage has been implemented creating harsh divisions: *blancos*, *indios*, *trigueños*, *morenos*, *prietos*, and Haitians. All of these titles have been applied as a mechanism to describe skin color while blatantly excluding Haitians and denying Dominican African-ness: "Caribbean societies illustrate such hierarchies in all aspects of people's lives, economically, politically, and socially, where white categories are placed 'at the top', with black 'at the bottom' and the coloured or mixed population comprising a formal intermediate category" (Howard 730). Many Dominicans place themselves in the "intermediate category" regardless of their apparent African-ness. Junot Diaz uses some of these terms to describe characters throughout the novel.

Racial categorization in Dominican culture varies from racial categorization in American culture in one paramount way: American culture uses "white" as the fixed standard, and Dominican culture uses "black" as the fixed standard. Kunsu argues, "In the United States colored signifies 'other than white,' whereas in the Dominican Republic the multitude of race terms indicate 'other than black'" (218). Racial categorization in the Dominican Republic manifests itself as constructive, meaning that racial categories move up the social ladder away from blackness and towards whiteness.

The process of whitening Dominican culture, or *blanqueamiento*, transfers into hair culture. Styling hair by "improving" it allows an individual to elevate themselves in their racial categorization. Natural hair in the Dominican Republic carries a serious social stigma; one could go as far as to say that it is considered ugly. White women are often referred to as "blonde" regardless of their hair color (Badillo, "Only My Hairdresser Knows for Sure"). This idealistic image of hair conflicts with nature. Black Dominican women attempt to achieve an ethnically backwards hair style and present themselves as more European than African, as noted in Casandra Badillo's "Only My Hairdresser Knows for Sure:"

'Straightening' does not whiten a woman, straightening is about self-denial.

Being black in the Dominican Republic has never meant anything else. Accepting oneself as black means recognizing oneself as oppressed and exploited. The construction of a

creative and free identity evolves from a double denial: to recognize oneself in the act of 'not being' and to affirm it (37).

The situation in its entirety makes a mockery out of racial acceptance. An individual's race is inescapable, as Diaz confirms in *Oscar Wao*. The characters in the book cannot deny their ancestry just as much as one cannot change his or her ethnicity by chemically altering his or her hair under false pretenses.

The most apparent evidence of the racial identity versus hair argument lies in Lola's transformation alone:

Throughout the novel the U.S.-raised Lola has continually undermined traditional Dominican notions of woman/daughterhood: she has cut off her long, straight hair... Lola has, in essence, undermined her Dominican identity, positioning herself as Other, which in the Dominican conception means Haitian. (Kunsa 217)

Lola battles with assimilation and remaining true to her racial identity. Her hair, the cause of envy amongst the black girls in her youth, often reflects her position in terms of who she considers herself to be at specific stages in her life. When Lola suddenly decides to cut her hair during her rebellious phase, it causes quite a bit of turmoil. Her mother becomes infuriated:

Lola without the straight hair is just a dark-skinned girl with wide hips and a wide rear-end, a girl with a black mother and a brother with an afro. She is, for all intents and purposes, black... Racial categorization, specifically the category of black, instead divides [Puerto Ricans and Dominicans]... By shaving off her straight hair, Lola inadvertently aligns herself with blackness and thereby earns the derision of her peers. (Kunsa 221)

Her sudden denial of her Dominican heritage and acceptance of her blackness exposes a deeply rooted issue amongst Dominicans. Lola uncovers her "Dominican" identity while residing with La Inca in the Dominican Republic. Rosío teaches Lola how to be a "real Dominican girl" by "fixing" her hair and dressing her accordingly (Diaz 71). Lola expresses a desire to embrace her blackness towards the end of her stay with La Inca as she ponders running away: "I would let myself grow dark in the sun, no more hiding from it, let my hair indulge in all its kinks" (Diaz 209). The euphoric freedom of allowing herself to simply let go exposes Lola's connection to her ethnic background.

Lola's mother Beli also expresses rebellion similarly when she decides to chemically process her hair without La Inca's consent (Diaz 128). This occurs during Beli's coming of age and pursuit of beauty. Beli's dark skin represents an "ill omen" (Diaz 248) and sets an ironic platform for her anti-Haitian attitude. When Beli first meets the Gangster, he offends her by calling her "*morena*" since "she was not *morena* (even the car dealer knew better, called her *india*)" (Diaz 115). Here Diaz expresses a quality of Dominican-ness that is frequently overlooked. *Morena* implies blackness, and to Beli there is no greater insult. To most outside of Dominican culture, the difference is insignificant. Beli's straight hair serves as her ticket away from blackness: "By perming her straight hair, Beli destroys what is perhaps her one link to whiteness" (Kunsa 220). Dominican culture is heavily immersed in the appearance of hair. Having straight, soft hair is superior to having kinks, which serves as a window into a hidden past of African lineage.

The effects of hair on the female identity are quite clear. Yet, a parallel to the male gender exists as well. The young Oscar has a very neat haircut due to his mother's care. Young Oscar manages to be romantically successful. The older, less fortunate Oscar wears his "semi-kink" hair in what is described as a "Puerto Rican afro" (Diaz 20), or more importantly not

Dominican. This transformation from keeping his kink locks under control to wearing his hair unmaintained symbolizes the undesirable qualities of African-ness; his peers often pressure him to cut his hair. In the later years of his life, he loses weight, and his hair is deemed acceptable once again. Oscar finally reaches his lifelong goal when he is at his aesthetic peak, further enforcing the concept of taming blackness.

Racial uncertainty within Dominican culture lies profoundly beneath centuries of oppression and conflict. Hair culture in the Dominican Republic plays a vast role in the perception of racial and ethnic acceptance. Hair serves as a racial signifier and imposes racial categorization whether through the implication or the denial of blackness. Junot Diaz uses sentiments of denial to further this conclusion as it remains evident throughout Dominican culture. Diaz picks up on this theme in Dominican society and applies it to the overarching principle of personal identity and racial insecurities. Through the characterization in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Diaz challenges and defaces the true racial roots of a nation while using hair as the driving signifier of race and racial identity.

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