

Breaking the Circle of the Plantation:  
Violence, Affect and the Ephemeral in Junot Díaz's  
Afro-Caribbean Literary Imagination

by

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# Table of Contents

Introduction	1
I. Dissing Discourse: The Plantation as Archive of Emotion	23
II. “You can never run away:” Captivity, Fugitivity and The Circle	57
III. <i>Brief Wondrous Life:</i> Writing Violence in the Break	81
Conclusion	110

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# Introduction

In a video recording of her performance *Sans Gravity*, which was presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in July of 2003 in New York City, ‘Indigenous Badass’ and multimedia artist Nao Bustamante enters a spacious gallery, the floor of which has been covered up in some spots with clusters of clear, water-filled plastic bags.<sup>1</sup> Before we see her figure, a projected black-and-white video with the effect of a broken film reel screens the word “Beautiful,” which is written in one of those antiquated newspaper fonts we see etched on skin whenever we think of a tattoo. The word rotates, becoming a mere line on the wall when it has turned a right angle.

No stage in view, Bustamante meanders her way to the front. Nine minutes into the recorded performance, she invites her viewers to get closer, her body gaining a magnetic attraction, as she begins to unravel a clear roll of tape. She has made a kind of rope from this tape, the end of which has covered over what I believe is a microphone. Suddenly, a gentleman emerges beside her with a plastic bag filled halfway with water. Bustamante places the microphone inside of the bag, and uses another roll of tape to stick a portion onto the outer surface of the bag, testing the stickiness that has joined together the surfaces of two objects made from the same material, but which have taken on drastically different shapes. She leans in and out, hesitantly, before she finally plunges her head into the tiny, fragile, and contained body of water. Her head is submerged entirely while she tapes the circumference of the lip of the bag tightly around her neck.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sans Gravity*. Dir. Nao Bustamante. Perf. Nao Bustamante. *Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library*. Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, n.d. Web. 8 Apr. 2015.

She stands erect, head underwater, body exposed to the external world. Her eyes are open as her mouth forms a smile, exposing the brightness of the whiteness of her teeth. This, curiously, is met with laughter from the audience, which Bustamante embraces. Red marker in hand, Bustamante draws a square around what would be her face and a line down the middle. She holds for two seconds, before letting out a short, sharp cry that registers as a yelp. Bustamante lifts her arms into the air and lowers them as if she isn't sure she is drowning. Finally, she breaks the bag open with her fingers, and lets out a sigh, no, a giant breathe, of relief. With both of her hands in front of her—the right cups the left—Bustamante breathes in and out, in and out, turning again to face another plastic bag filled with water, face open, waiting to swallow her up. She repeats this several times. Afterward, Bustamante has members of the audience tape water-filled bags all over her body as she walks around the room. When her body has been completely covered up, Bustamante stands still before she has the bags removed. The performance ends almost immediately.

At the beginning of this essay “Feeling Down, Feeling Brown: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” (2006), José Muñoz calls for a “fine-tuning” of what many of us contemporary citizen subjects consider a cruel truth: “that depression has become one of the dominant affective positions addressed within the cultural field of contemporary global capitalism” (“Feeling Brown” 675).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to the authentic website for the Melanie Klein Fund, a registered charity founded on February 1, 1955 with permission to reproduce definitions from *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (2011), the depressive position is a “mental constellation” central to the child’s development with respect to his or her realization of hateful feelings “phantasies” about the loved object, prototypically the mother; the depressive position also refers, more generally, “to the experience, at any stage of life, of guilt or grief over hateful attacks and over the damaged state of external and

In his essay, Muñoz employs Melanie Klein's theory of the depressive position, which he describes in relation to people of color and other minoritarian subjects; he does so specifically in his reading of Nao Bustamante's video installation *Neopolitan* (2003), where he considers how depression is formed and organized around particular "historical and material contingencies that include race, gender and sex" ("Feeling Brown" 676). According to Muñoz, Bustamante's work "tells us a story about belonging in alterity;" they are meditations on the particularities of the choreography of self and other that organizes our reality ("Feeling Brown" 675-6). Muñoz then claims that *Neopolitan* is an installation that "can be read as an illustration of the depressive position and its connection to minoritarian aesthetic and political practice" ("Feeling Brown" 676). In other words, Muñoz provides a rubric from which to visualize the animation of "a feeling of brownness that transmits and is structured through a depressive stance, a kind of feeling down," through Bustamante's performance of her queer Latinidad ("Feeling Brown" 676).

Using the structure above that I have built using theories of depression and affect foregrounded by Klein and Muñoz, I will now provide a reading of a video recording of Nao Bustamante's performance *Sans Gravity*. Thereupon, I return to my detailed account of the beginning of Bustamante's performance in order to read for those instances where her depressive position interlocks with race and gender through a specific structure of feeling that imposes on the body.

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internal objects, varying in level of catastrophe on a scale from normal morning for loss to severe depression. See "Depressive Position." Melanie Klein Fund. Ed. Eleanor S. Burton. Routledge, n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2015.

When Bustamante rips open the first bag, the break is not clean. Rather, it is messy: Bustamante's shirt and pants are soaked, yet some sections remain dry, meaning there is a clear distinction between those parts of her body that have been affected by the repetitive act of drowning and those that are not. Furthermore, the ring of tape that once contained her within this space of suffocation continues to surround her neck. By the time she has repeated the act several times, the rings have accumulated, forming on her body the ruins of her violent contact with water, an element that "symbolizes knowledge and emotion," writes Bustamante on her website. If this is true, then Bustamante's performance constitutes an alternate mode of associating with these definitions of water, which for a reader engaged in the discourse of blackness within a historical moment bent on perpetuating anti-black racism and reconfigurations of racialized slavery, is also symbolic of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and those slave ships that carried the unknown bodies of the African Diaspora across the expansive sea.

It is within the context of her body's relationship to the water that I find Bustamante's performance valuable as I move toward an introduction of Junot Díaz's work. By the end of *Sans Gravity*, Bustamante's body is covered in water-filled bags that have been taped onto her. She can no longer walk as she used to and must stop in place by the time she is entirely covered up. Her body has been debilitated by the weight of knowledge and emotion. So, what kinds of knowledge and emotion are these? I would say Bustamante's performance is about the rhetoric of disgust often used to describe the body of the minoritarian subject. When she stands still in the middle of the room, the surface, movements and orientations of her body have been

swallowed up by the dominant sexual and racial discourses represented by the bags, which include in them, as well, those constructions of female gender and sexuality that bind her to these larger ideological machinations. What her performance shows, is that she is irrevocably bound up by and entangled with the violence of dominant historical knowledge (those that sustain anti-black racism, racial slavery, heteronormativity and heteromascularity), which her big, brown, queer female body remains affected by and vulnerable to in contemporary society. This is to say that Bustamante's performance is a performance of her Latinidad, where her explosive conferral with the historical effects of dominant knowledge generates, through repetition, an affective structure of feeling; the repetition of Bustamante's performance as the rings accumulate increases the potential for others to latch onto such modes of being in the world. This is to also say that the differences produced in between these submergences constitute a performativity of race, in which, I would argue, the potential for a political doing emerges.

My decision to begin this introduction with a reading of Nao Bustamante's performance is undeniably a result of having been formed by José Muñoz. His writings on performance, ephemera and their complex relations to race have provided me with a toolbox filled with critical and reparative rigs that have informed my readings of art, literature, and the world as a contemporary citizen subject living under inherently anti-black and heteromasculine structures of governmentality.

As Muñoz already does in his essay, and as I hope to actualize through the writing of this project as a queer subject and reader of the Dominican Diaspora, we

must lean in closely and listen to the grinding of the gears of our current historical moment. If we, as contemporary citizen subjects lean in closely enough, that is, if we pay closer attention to the ways in which a culture dominated by global capitalism mimetically renders portrayals of “the problem of depression,” we will hear the ringing noise of a filtered, yet pervasive crypto-universalist script: that depression is gendered, yes, but more tirelessly, that depression for the Dominican subject—“*La depresión? Tu ‘ta loco?’*”—is something only the gringos have to deal with. And yet, there is nothing else I believe less than that very assumption common among our peoples (“Feeling Down” 675).

Thusly, I will read Bustamante’s performance as well as Klein’s and Muñoz’s definitions of the depressive position alongside my readings of the narrator in Junot Díaz’s *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Yunió de Las Casas; specifically, I will consider his relationships to his mother in *Drown*, and separate but relatedly, the mother of his fantasies in *Oscar Wao*, Hypatía Belicia Cabral, who is also the mother of his friend Oscar de León and his ex-girlfriend Lola, within the theoretical framework of affective brownness fleshed out above. All the while, I stretch these critiques and apply them also to my conceptions of blackness and queerness that stem from my readings of Yunió.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar arguably commits suicide because of the “full-on condition” of his severe depression, which in the context of Kleinian theory, stems from the oedipal situation that arises during his visit to the Dominican Republic where he finds out that his love-object Ybón, already considered a whore by the rest of the community, has a gangster boyfriend. The realization of hateful feelings within the desire for his love-object causes him to feel anxiety on behalf of Ybón, which begins to center on her welfare and survival. With this recognition of the oedipal situation, comes the diminishing of his control over his love-object, however. Eventually, remorse, guilt, and profound sadness emerge in Oscar even as he continues to fall in love with her. The unattainability of her love generates feelings of loss and mourning that eventually become subsumed by his ego. No longer attached to his own nor his love-object’s survival, Oscar leads himself to a death in the sugarcane fields (*Oscar Wao* ).

I argue that Dominican writer Junot Díaz produces literature that deserves to be read within this alternate, affective framework of knowledge and emotions in the forms of historical effects and political feelings. Famous worldwide for his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his collection of short stories *Drown* introduce us to the coming-of-age story of Yunior. The stories “Ysrael” and “Aguantando” especially give the reader a sense of Yunior’s coming-of-age in the slums of Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic’s capital, as well as out there in the country, in a town called Boca Chica where his mother’s relatives live (*Drown* 69-87).

Bored in “Aguantando,” Yunior wishes to go back to the slums whenever he visits them. Yet, in “Ysrael,” Yunior’s delirium is met with a surprise encounter with a stranger on an autobus (*Drown* 12). With a pastelito in his pocket, Yunior sits down and a greasy stain emerges on the surface of his pants near the crotch area. An older male stranger rubs at the stain, pinching, all the while, Yunior’s genitalia. “You pato,” says Yunior. In English, this phrase translates to “You fag,” which sheds insight into the kind of education he was subject to as a male growing up in Dominican society: a structure of knowledge that teaches its subjects that “faggots” are “perverts.”

In New Jersey, Yunior does his best to abandon the slums that made him, in order to, in typical American fashion, make something of himself. However, he finds that he just does not fit in. I argue that this misfittedness is an affect of his position between the terms “faggot” and “pervert” as a depressed, queer minoritarian subject who is always already *inbetween*. A fragmented subject who is also a product of the Dominican Diaspora, Yunior struggles to find a sense of place or belonging to which

he can latch onto. In the story “Drown,” Yunior recounts a drive in his friend Alex’s car where he is once again present in an instance of homophobia:

Sometimes Alex will stop by the side of the road and say, Excuse me. When somebody comes over from the bar he’ll point his plastic pistol at them, just to see if they’ll run or shit their pants. Tonight he just puts his head out the window. Fuck you! He shouts and then settles back in his seat, laughing.

That’s original, I say.

He puts his head out the window again. Eat me, then!

Yeah, Danny grumbles from the back. Eat me. (*Drown* 103)

“Eat me,” the phrase that ends the passage rather than the one exclaimed by Alex, acquires a “yeah, right” sort of tone, where Yunior, unsatisfied with the events of the night, cannot withstand any longer the violent discourse of masculinity that surrounds him in his friend Alex’s car. This violent discourse takes the form of a performance of heteromascularity. Alex poses with a pistol in hand, the phallogentric adrenaline of hegemony flowing through his body. Although undeniably phallic, this pistol is plastic, making Alex an artificial apparatus of the state. Artificial-sounding is what he shouts out the window, which blends into the wider soundscape of homophobia that dominates discourse. Therefore, when Yunior calls him out for unoriginality, he is actually drawing the reader’s attention toward the artificiality of his own character within this scene that plays out the violence of heteromascularity. In other words, Yunior feels out of place, unwelcome in the space generated by this hateful structure of feeling he has no choice but to be present in. Otherwise, people will begin to suspect. (*Drown* 103)

The recollection Yunior provides of this particular instance of homophobia is followed by a confession of sorts. “Twice. That’s it,” writes Yunior as he begins the next section. As he holds his breath between the moment he verbalizes his

detachment from the discourse and the moment he reveals his experiences of homosexuality, the reader is suspended as well, forging all the while a connection between Yuniór's narrative and the homosexuality we know forms part of his being. The reader, in this break, is inclined to find a bridge, to find that uncertain evidence of Yuniór's demons that constitute his queerness. Indeed, on the page after, he follows with a detailing of his first homosocial experience with Beto that actually turns into a homosexual encounter. In that scene, Beto confidently gives Yuniór a handjob in his parents' apartment one day while watching porn together (*Drown* 104).

It is this memory that Yuniór represses in the car, as well as in his basement, which he regularly submits to after having sexually engaged with his best friend at the time:

Mostly I stayed in the basement, terrified I would end up abnormal, a fucking pato, but he was my best friend and back then that mattered to me more than anything. (*Drown* 104)

In this instance of retreat, Yuniór turns away from the world and enters the underground, the subaltern space of the domestic structure, where we throw our junk, our baggage. For Yuniór, however, the basement isn't simply a holding-place for his family's material baggage, but a space in which he can exist without the threat of heteromascularity oppressing his desires. Despite his isolation from these forms of oppression, however, Yuniór does enough repressing on his own. As he lowers into the basement, down into the underground, the proprietary abyss, Yuniór also lowers himself by detaching his self from the super-ego of heteromascularity that determines his perceived self in the external world. Therefore, he enacts an ethics of the self in the form of protection from the oppressive forces of the outside world, which is to say

society. The affect produced by such machinations of violence actually lower him, which then makes him feel abnormal. I would argue that Yuniór reckons with his queerness in this moment, even though his existence within the heteronormative domain has always been implied—ever since his brother Rafa conditions him into a heteromascularity through a particularly erotic sexual education back in the Dominican Republic.<sup>4</sup> The affect of such conditioning (which is to also say policing) of the body, prompts a type of flooded reaction from Yuniór that resists assuming the uninhabitable ideal of heterosexuality. Yet the possibility of these queer feelings becoming public knowledge cripples Yuniór with fear that it may indicate, or prove, his abnormality. Terrified, Yuniór sides with the oppressor when he realizes he may be “a fucking pato,” as a means of dealing with his so-called abnormality. This close reading of Yuniór shows how essential moving and shifting is for the queer Dominican subject who lives within heteromasculine structures of power and domination that constrain the body. Incapable of “normally” engaging with the social world, as a Dominican from New Jersey should, Yuniór chooses to withdraw from it by going to his basement. (*Drown* 104)

I read Yuniór’s decision to visit Beto again as one that stems out of a particular love for his friend Beto, a love I, as a queer reader, believe actually grows after the isolating experience of his repression in the basement into something greater than friendship. I believe this love comes from that place of isolation, that abject structure of feeling Yuniór was forced into. There, in the darkest corners of his psyche, Yuniór, I would argue, actually discovers that he too is subject to the violence

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<sup>4</sup> See the stories “Ysrael” and “Aguantando” in *Drown*.

of normativity when it is combined with the homophobia of heteromascularity; I would argue that he feels the destabilizing power of this particular subject-position that exists outside of, as the abject, this particular normative domain. This is to say that Yuniór identifies a political feeling, one that resists the forced upon affect of the historical effects of dominant ideological structures and apparatuses. In other words, to invoke José Muñoz, Yuniór's mode of *feeling down* has actually made his repressive experience of queerness in the basement a way of being in the world once he emerges from its depths.

I read this scene in *Drown*, specifically Yuniór's underwater experience in the community swimming pool, as indicative of those shifting dynamics of power between the state and its minoritarian subjects present in Nao Bustamante's *Sans Gravity*, where feeling brown is also constitutively to feel down. In this kind of relationship, the brown subject remains subject to those impositions on his brownness that contribute to his pathology, and thus, within an inherently racist structure of power, makes Yuniór occupy a depressive position within his minoritarian subjecthood (*Drown* 93). Yuniór's *feeling queer* alters and functions in conjunction with his feeling brown in the world, as a particular minoritarian subject who has been undertaken by the affect of the historical effects of heteromascularity. Therefore, his experience in the basement, as a performance of a particular racial positioning of the depressive stance, runs against dominant (white) affect, and therefore constitutes an (uncertain, discontinuous and erratic) act of political doing that aligns brownness with another affective field; this reinforcement of abjection, as well the "calling out" of

dominant forms of knowledge and emotions, becomes a mode of resistance for Yuniur.

This resistance, I would argue, is Yuniur enabling the Kleinian term “depressive position functioning” through the alternate affective circuit of the basement.<sup>5</sup> In other words, when Yuniur regards his friendship with Beto as the thing that matters to him more than anything, he acknowledges a separation between himself and Beto, the other in that particular instance (*Drown* 104). Hence, depression gains a resilient quality that bounces Yuniur back into the world. At the swimming pool the next day Beto touches Yuniur:

He put his hand on my shoulder, my pulse a code under his palm. Let’s go, he said. Unless of you course you’re not feeling good.  
I’m feeling fine, I said. (*Drown* 105)

Perhaps Yuniur’s pulse races because of the intensity that such intimacy has spurred within him, an intensity of emotion and feeling not even he fully understands yet. These feelings are still a code for him as much as they might be for Beto. However, instead of recoiling from an explosive confusion as he does in other such instances when he calls others “pato,” Yuniur feels fine. At least, he pretends like he does.

By holding such political feelings, Yuniur must also withhold his insurgent being from the auspices of sociopolitical structures that determine our culture. Yuniur must shield himself from his own friends, who seem to have become another version of “the cops stabbing their searchlights out across the water” he describes earlier in the story. After passing Beto’s home and noticing that all the windows are dark, Yuniur decides to go to the pool anyway in hopes of finding him there. His hope lost,

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<sup>5</sup> “Depressive position functioning” is a term by Melanie Klein that refers to a particular stance of the depressive position where the individual can take personal responsibility and perceive himself and the other as separate.

Yunior dives into the water and describes poetically the movement of black and Latino bodies that swim past him, which he writes are “more a disturbance of water than a body” (*Drown* 93).

In this scene, the basement has become a pool. Transitioning into a paranoiac state, Yunior then follows:

While everything above is loud and bright, everything below is whispers. And always the risk of coming up to find cops stabbing their searchlights out across the water. And then everyone running, wet feet slapping against the concrete, yelling, Fuck you, officers, you puto sucios, fuck you. (*Drown* 93)

Again, the setting has been divided into above and below. As he often does, Yunior occupies the lower domain, where everything “is whispers.” The “everything” in this phrase begs the question, what constitutes what is below? According to the passage, what is below would have to be what is excluded from the “loud and bright,” that which surrounds but never really exists within the vivid character of a harmonious world. However, this harmony becomes a series of consonant sounds, dissonance, when everyone runs away from the cops, their “wet feet slapping against concrete, yelling, Fuck you, officers, you puto sucios, fuck you.” These police officers function as extensions of the state that use their searchlights like weapons, stabbing through and across the water, piercing the black abyss of the night with the incriminating light of vigilance. However, it is under the watchful eye of the state that Yunior learns to swerve, go unnoticed, disguise his truer self, whatever that may be.

It is indeed possible, and perhaps useful, to read Yunior’s submergence as a kind of walk down into the underworld. Told not to look back, Yunior does so anyway, his keen awareness forming a curiosity within him that is more of an itch

that cannot go away with a simple scratch. The backward orientation of his gaze marks the beginning of the end, where Yunior confronts the history that has made him. Therefore, I read the pool, as a mime, a reformulation of the ocean in the form of the state of exclusion, built with Slavery and maintained by necropolitics. I cannot help but associate the water with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slave ships “more a disturbance of water” than a boat carrying bodies across an expansive ocean. Underwater in what, for me, symbolizes the Atlantic Ocean, Yunior is held in the belly of the slave ship. Here, withheld from the loudness and brightness of the day, Yunior, whose body reduces to flesh, a thing, an object, he develops an awareness of the bodies that surround them, tracing their movements, orientations, their skin color; as he makes these assumptions about certain bodies, such certainty collapses as they disappear. Therefore, I argue that Yunior, as he becomes an ephemeral subject in the archive, becomes aware of his own body and what it carries, even though, to carry this imagery even further, he could stretch his hand out and not see a thing in front of him. (*Drown* 93)

*My leaning in* on the character of Yunior in such a way renders him as an *uncertain reader*, someone who does not read for certainty and exactitude, but finds fixity in how bodies are *affected* by dominant constructions of race, gender and sex, among others. This sets Yunior up as a *certain kind of reader* in the world, perhaps a queer reader such as myself, one acutely attentive to the traces of violence, and one who has been formed affectively by sexual molestation; the discourse and violence of heteromascularity inherited from the Trujillo regime, which for the continuation of

this project I will refer to as the Trujillato; and the apparatuses of Slavery on the Island.<sup>6</sup> However, I would argue, that Yunior is formed most of all by his imaginary, which is one that emerges from sites of rural poverty in the Dominican Republic and then gets transplanted, as a result of the Dominican Diaspora that he is a product of, into yet another state of poverty in the form of New Jersey's urban landscape.

Through my close reading of *Drown*, I aim to prompt various methods for reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as well. Being the depressive subject he is always already conditioned to be, it is not surprising, then, that after the death of his ex-girlfriend Lola's brother Oscar, whom he rooms with at Rutgers University, Yunior grieves, and grieves hard for the death of a fellow nerd, freak, whatever you call a Dominican who is more of a cause for speculation than a Dominican in the sense that would invite acceptance among our peoples. Himself haunted by the high-level fukú that has cursed la familia Cabral for generations, Yunior dedicates his life to writing an archive that chronicles their history and traces their horrors, from the beginning of the Trujillato to the months after Oscar's death.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps he does so as well as a means of achieving a greater understanding of his own Latinidad, which he

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<sup>6</sup> Tyrannical dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina (also known as "El Jefe," "El Chivo," or "fuckface" to quote Yunior) ruled the Dominican Republic from the year 1930 to 1961, both officially as president and as a military strongman who exercised his power under figurehead presidents. This bloody period in the history of the Dominican Republic is referred to as The Trujillo Era. It is also commonly known as the Trujillato, a colloquial term I have adopted for the purposes of this project in order to emphasize the Era's rampant heteromascularity.

<sup>7</sup> Fukú Americanus is not simply an event but a process cluster of events, continuous but erratic, like the continuous yet fitful machination of Western modernity, the gears of economic prosperity oiled by the sweat of slaves on Plantations all over the Greater Antilles. Fukú, like the plot of a war novel, often culminates in a spectacular crux of violent proportions, the events leading up to the apex always in flux, gaining momentum as time runs out. Fukú is always already in traction. Multiple strains of fukú afflict at once. It is its own jazz. It makes a braid of the multiple strands of scenes of subjection that make up its parts. There is no plot where fukú is either, for it there is no denouement. Its strikes are unpredictable, yet you know they are coming, especially when it is close. An earth-shattering hurricane is what fukú is, renewable and destructive, and it dare not run on anyone else's schedule but its own. Fukú is history, and it certainly, without fail, repeats itself. (*Oscar Wao* 1-7)

fears have been tainted by the curses and demons that dominate his past and constitute his (queer) present.

Sometime during his research of the Cabral family records he keeps in his basement stuffed inside four refrigerators, Yunior finds that it begins, on paper at least, with none other than Generalissimo Trujillo, a man who helped legalize and made commendable anti-black racism in the form of antihaitianismo, ordering the massacre of countless Haitians over the course of his rule (*Oscar Wao* 330). One such event was the Parsley Massacre of 1937.<sup>8</sup> Edwidge Danticat depicts this event in her novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998), which is set near the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic during the height of a most violent racism against Haitians, and follows the life of one Amabelle Desir, a Haitian woman in search of her lover Sebastian Onius. In Danticat's novel, the presence of Trujillo's violence resides in the mundane, yet profoundly affective every-day struggles of Amabelle, a housemaid for a wealthy plantation-owning Dominican family. In a similar sense to how Trujillo's presence feels on the body of his black subjects in *The Farming of Bones*, Yunior's narration of Trujillo presents a somewhat, ahistorical figure with supernatural powers,

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<sup>8</sup> The Parsley Massacre is also known as "El Corte" or "The Cutting." During the genocide initiated by Trujillo himself on October 1937, all Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans who were questionably Haitian and already ideologically inoculated by racist structures of power "were approached" by soldiers who determined whether or not they were to be killed based on the hailed subject's utterance of the word *perejil*. The quotations are there to signify that what truly happened was that these innocent people were charged by soldiers carrying guns and machetes like a squadron of human bulldozers, many beating down on the victims or chasing them as they ran toward the Artibonite River that divides Haiti from the Dominican Republic. This violent confrontation *between* and the re-orientation *of* otherized bodies, through the process of embodiment, made the massacre a performance of manifested racialized utterances. Hence, within the violence of the massacre and the affect generated thereafter, these subordinated individuals experienced a performance of race that determined their fates over the span of a single word, which their Creole tongues just could not pronounce "correctly."

the ultimate purveyor of evil and distributor of violence who treats the Dominican Republic as though it were his own plantation (*Oscar Wao* 225). Therefore there is another source of fear, the seeming eternity of the evil of the fukú.

In the preface following a poem by Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott, Díaz recreates the myth of the fukú in *Oscar Wao*, planting its roots in freshly colonized Caribbean soil at the start of the European colonization of the islands of The Greater Antilles. Unbeknownst to many people whose understanding of history is more aligned with what we regard as History with a capital “H,” the island of Hispaniola was once divided into two parts: Saint-Domingue, a French colony to the West, and San Domingo, a Spanish colony to the East. The Island, as Yunior refers to it in the novel, was the first site for the importation of those captive peoples that had been kidnapped from the Western regions of Africa. Thus, through the myth of the fukú, Díaz established a relationship between colonization and the Trujillato. Therefore, Díaz, through a narratorial pastiche of sorts, blends history, geography and time, and pours out into the archive a queer historicizing project where he is concerned primarily with establishing certain congruities between the history of the plantation and the history of the Trujillato; for Díaz, both seem to overlap in their employment of racial enslavement and oppression, as well as in the normativizing of an exclusively phallogentric heteromascularity that excludes and silences women. Indeed, in the novel, Belicia Cabral is a character whose past is riddled with many such silences.

I do aim to prompt a certain kind of reading of the novel that sprouts from a process of dehumanization that I would argue, based on my reading of Hortense

Spillers' essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), begins at the moment of capture where particularly the female captive body has been forced to surrender her humanity, which has not only been repossessed by the captor, but by the male captives, as well, whom, in more brutal ways than not, lay claim to the body of the captive female through often violently sexual means. The voice of the captive female has also been silenced, as few records reside in the "archive" that prove her existence. Stripped of their human beginnings, their ontology, these genderless bodies become nothing else but flesh on the plantation. There, the female slave becomes a reproductive machine for the primary use of continuing the project of anti-black racism in the Americas. A vehicle for racial (and sexual) slavery, the female slave is evidence of a flagrant sexism within racial slavery that marks her disappearance from history more than once—in fact, many times over. As a result of such compaction of oppression, many of these female captives felt they had nothing to lose. The point of this deviation is, paradoxically, to shorten the distance between historical constructions of the female captive in the context of Slavery and the experiences of dark-skinned Dominican women during the Trujillato. The way in which I do so, however, is by paying close attention to the character of Belicia in *Oscar Wao*, whose body in Yuniór's archive makes us think about reconfigurations of slavery, anti-black racism, and the relationships between constructions of sexuality and blackness both in the Caribbean and the United States.

To harken back to *Drown*, as well as connect it with the historical construction of racial slavery, diaspora alters domestic spaces, which Yuniór, I would argue, finds in the muted movements and silence of his mother, who abandons him in a variety of

ways. Therefore, I focus my readings on these movements of the Dominican mother, who carries her children along with everything else, the one who gets dumped by her cheating husband Rafael, and whose children become a part of that dump that weighs her down. Yunior is raised in a corrupt family structure, affected by the abandonment of his father, and the peculiar distance he has from his mother, both of which seem all too related to the history of racial slavery in the Americas to ignore. This is to say that as a subject and as a reader, Yunior is affected by such abandonment, a type of dispossession in the form of detachment. This reading of *Drown* helps me understand Yunior's fixation with his mother's movements. However, it is through Oscar's mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral, that Yunior, as we imagine all narrators do, struggles with his own internal conflicts, specifically the affect of his abandonment. These, I believe, Yunior wishes to disidentify from by plunging into an emotional historicizing project in the form of an alternative, which is to say affective, or rather affected archive, that will illuminate those very obstacles to his freedom.

With Yunior as my very own North Star, I argue that his archive, mainly *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, functions as an epic emotional response to the polyvalent transhistorical effects of slavery, anti-black racism, and dominant constructions of sexuality and blackness before and after the Dominican Diaspora. This is a response that connects Yunior, and therefore us as readers of Junot Díaz, with the Trujillato, the plantation, the slave trade, anti-black racism, and other forms of violence that are historical, systemic, and pervasive. Indeed, I aim to show through both an expansive and deep analysis of Junot Díaz's work, that we are all involved in and affected by these forms, structures and systems of violence.

In this thesis, I develop multiple structure of theory in order to read Caribbean writing as brown, black, Caribbean and queer texts. Metaphorically speaking, I stitch together fragments of various fabrics of theoretical writings that have already been woven into certain schools of thought (queer theory, performance studies, affect studies, Caribbean poetics, and critical race theories) and create a quilt of textures that I aim to feel throughout my analysis in order to unearth the forms of subjugated knowledge(s) and emotions of a history that has been, and continues to be, repeatedly silenced.

Chapter 1 explores the landscape of the plantation, its historical effects and the affect of racialized slavery that get transferred onto, in a variety of oppressive means, the body of the slave. I argue that the body of the slave becomes a site of creolization, and thus, through the performance of the “obedient slave” role, gains an insurgent ground on which they can take flight in the forms of an expressed, yet impossible subjectivity, and escape. Finally, I show how the seemingly closed circle of the plantation is rendered porous, and how the landscape of the plantation travels on the ruined back of the slave. Chapter 2 employs the theoretical demonstrations of the first chapter to trace the bodies of the black Dominican during and after the Dominican Diaspora, which occurred concurrently with the Trujillato. Hence, I show how the affect of reconfigurations of racial slavery during the Trujillato, along with the bodies it dispels, permeates the domestic space of the migratory household of these diasporic subjects; in this respect, I provide examples in which these reconfigurations actually reinforce anti-black racism and homophobia. In Chapter 3, I read closely the language of abjection in the archive, particularly how the narrator

chooses to depict modes of spectacular violence. I find in this chapter that the affect of violence gains a materiality not only as a result of its ephemeral tendencies, but also as it is written on the page. I show, finally, how writing abjection in the historical archive is often to write with or as violence.

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# I

## Dissing Discourse: The Plantation as Archive of Emotions

*Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning in them its risk becomes realized.*

– Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1997)

The ontology of the slave in the historical archive is one built upon uncertain evidence, or rather no evidence at all. With this knowledge, or lack thereof, I will read certain literary texts as containers of the uncertainty of being, focusing especially on the range of what that uncertainty feels like. In this chapter, I will argue that the ephemerality of the landscape of the plantation and its manifestations on the body of the slave carries the affect of the historical effects of the plantation. This, I provide, offers us an affective continuity from which we may draw congruencies between black life on the plantation hundreds of years ago, and black, brown, and particularly Afro-Caribbean life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If we take the above statement as an indication that the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato was also a reformulation of the plantation, then there is a congruity between the porousness of captivity as containment on the plantation and the porousness of the makings of the Dominican Diaspora. It is a kind of porousness, then, that allows for certain continuities to persist. Such continuities are the reformulations and reconfigurations of the operation and applicability of slave law under racialized slavery, which marked the stripping of human beginnings, which is to say nativity of the slave at the moment of capture. This particular form of anti-

black racism is exhausted both on the plantation grounds and centuries later by a most apt pupil of those colonists and planters during the conquest of the Caribbean: tyrant white supremacist Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, who together with Joaquín Balaguer and the United States government legalized antihaitianismo on the Dominican side of the island of Hispaniola. On those grounds, to wrestle with the ephemerality of the plantation through a literature of memory, such as Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), is to also render porous not only the seemingly closed circle of the plantation, but also the seemingly impenetrable Plátano Curtain erected by Trujillo during his regime in an effort to close off the Dominican Republic from the rest of the world.

This chapter is a performative undertaking and reparative recombination of a variety of historical, literary and theoretical writings; namely, C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1963), José Muñoz's essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" (1997) and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997). Through close readings of these texts, alongside Díaz's prose, I aim to draw a connection between the ruins of the landscape of the plantation society of Saint-Domingue and Trujillo's plantation very much into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I would argue the landscape of the modern world remains afflicted with. To that end, I contend the Caribbean landscape of the plantation is not in actuality a closed site, but the ephemerally eternal grounds of the Americas: the essential site of our modernity.

The dominant history of the Dominican Republic is a history of violent facts, of natural disasters and genocides. It is a history that has been performatively constructed, to fit the new model of Dominicanidad Balaguer and Trujillo established

with the legalization of antihaitianismo, the institutionalization of an insidious racism against Haitians that became the norm, so ingrained in the collective consciousness of the Dominican Republic that it has altered the lived experience of the every day and continues today. The machination of political discourse, along with the ideological inoculation caused by the thwarting of Dominican history in the education system, legitimized a distinct hierarchy among the population where the phenotypically darker Dominicans, Haitians and Dominican-Haitian subjects of the island of Hispaniola were made the primary site of institutional and systemic violence, made abject in a land that is as much theirs as it is their lighter skin neighbors'. This process marks the beginning of a shift in the population, the making of the diaspora as everyone became implicated in the anti-blackness of the Trujillato by fulfilling Trujillo's specifically racist role of the honorable citizen within the seemingly closed circle of the Island. Flight becomes the only way out, and the only way to carry and live with the difficulty of captive feelings, or so it seems.

I argue in this chapter that literature functions as the container of the landscape of the plantation reimagined and reset into performative motion. Specifically, I provide a method of reading such literature as an archive of creolization and linguistic process through my analysis of Glissant, and as emotional process based on my understanding of affect and feeling formed by both my readings of Muñoz and my readings of what James terms historical emotions, something I hesitate with later on in this chapter. I read Muñoz to then read for the residual historical affect of the landscape of the plantation in the form of captive feelings relayed in Díaz's fiction, which I also regard as Yunior's archive. Within my close

reading of Yuniors' archive, I aim not to talk about the actuality of the "lived" experience of the slave, but instead imagine with the literature of memory of the plantation to do the difficult, if not impossible: read for captive feelings to then imagine the possibility of subjectivity amidst extraordinary structural violence. Accordingly, I read such literature as an archive where I am able to imagine, alongside Yuniors, those buried captive feelings I aim to unearth.

The late archivist C.L.R. James, an Afro-Trinidadian historian, journalist and social theorist devoted an entire body of work to the investigation of the violence of slavery during its development in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, or San Domingo as it was also known.<sup>9</sup> Titled *The Black Jacobins* (1963), James' book is another kind of archive that aims to draw out ontology using more epistemological forms of historical evidence.<sup>10</sup> This is to say that James is concerned more with the actuality of the lives of the slaves than he is with the affect produced. However, in the "Preface to the First Edition," James states with a commanding emotional lyricism:

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<sup>9</sup> Saint-Domingue and San Domingo refer to the colonies on the island of Hispaniola that have since declared their independence from French and Spanish rule. They refer to what we know as Haiti and the Dominican Republic. See the preface and first chapter of *The Black Jacobins* for more details.

<sup>10</sup> In his book, James details the transformation of the slave from human to property on the plantation, provides an analysis of the slaveowners and their brutal practices, and traces, throughout the entirety of the text, the colony's history of revolution, particularly the slave revolt led by Touissant L'Ouverture. A slave until he was 45 years of age, L'Ouverture led the slave revolt that established Haiti as the first Black republic in the world. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another leader of the revolution defeated the French troops at the Battle of Vertières on November 18, 1803, leading the first successful slave army revolution. After France withdrew their remaining troops, Dessalines declared the independence of Saint-Domingue on January 1, 1804. According to Wikipedia, our very own public domain for free and reliable information on the Internet, the exact number of deaths due to the Haitian revolution remains unknown; uncertain evidence. However, it is known that the slaves that made it to Haiti from the trans-Atlantic slave trade journey, as well as slaves born in Haiti were the first documented in Haiti's archives. These archives have been transferred to France's National Archives as of 2015. Perhaps it has something to do with the series of brutal massacres Dessalines initiated as justice for his enslaved peoples.

The analysis is the science and the demonstration the art, which is history. The violent conflicts of our age enable our practiced vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore. Yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect historical emotions in that tranquility which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with poetry alone. (*Jacobins* xi)

In the passage above, James refers to using the science of interpretation to explain the biopolitics initiated by Christopher Columbus when he “discovered” the West Indies and merged three worlds with slavery on a small island in The Greater Antilles.<sup>11</sup>

James carefully calls his text “science” as it is an analysis of the biopolitical, as well as an “art” because of the poetic manner in which he is demonstrating through language the violent history of this region of the world (*Jacobins* xi). Within this poetic reflection of what he has written, James emphasizes the importance of returning to those moments of revolution in our history, especially in what he believed to be an age of technological advancement.

Furthermore, that the Trinidadian writer can experience “stillness of a seaside suburb” and still hear “most clearly and insistently the booming of Franco’s heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin’s firing squares, and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary moment” is an imaginary position that James summons in a historicizing project that unearths residual affect (*Jacobins* xi). Only by hesitating with the booming of revolutionary wars, the rattle of firing squads, “the fierce shrill turmoil,” can we begin to recollect the historical emotions that remain of such violence (*Jacobins* xi). I find it of note that poetry alone did not do the job for James. However, it is within this poetry, and within a discourse of brown and black thought that is both profoundly Caribbean and queer for me as a reader that I aim to

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<sup>11</sup> I am thinking here of Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics.

extrapolate those residual emotions deeply embedded within the historical effects of anti-black racism in the form of slavery. (*Jacobins* xi)

Indeed, as a reader of emotion who has been formed by José Muñoz's work and Sara Ahmed's contributions to affect studies, which I take as my strategies of reading for political feelings, I use James' passage from the early 1960 as a means of reading for historical emotions, which is to say I use the language of emotion he makes available in order to dig out the residual affect of slave life on the plantation. My goal is to find where and how these emotions come about in order to better understand the ontology of the slave. Speaking to this specific historicizing project of the ontology of the slave, there is the argument that the slave's ontology is anti-ontological because the body of the slave comes into this world amidst a process of dehumanization that removes any human beginnings from that body; that's how it becomes a commodity.<sup>12</sup> It's because of that process, then, since that body doesn't have any "proof" or "essence" of its historical being in the world, that I need this queer impulse of reading for feelings. The kinds of feelings that offer that sense of "proof," I would argue, are the ephemeral traces and glimmers of the historical effects of violence that surface on and within the body; this body, I argue, harbors political feelings as a result of such choreography of affective maneuverings.

In this spirit, my aim is to read Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) alongside such texts as C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1963), Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), and José Muñoz's "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" (1997) to pull through, by way of a

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<sup>12</sup> See Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982).

performative critique, that creolization and the modes of speech and resistance employed on the plantation function as maps of not just suffering, but of political feelings. Meanwhile, the novel, when read alongside other Caribbean and Latino texts that play with genre, functions as an archive of the range of feelings that we can imagine within this discourse of the plantation and its literatures.<sup>13</sup> I would go so far as to argue that Glissant’s “créolité,” which is Creole for “creoleness” is an affect, and the positioning of the creolized slave an affective subject position that is also severely depressive (*Poetics* 63). Therefore, I treat passages from the novel the same way I do *Poetics of Relation*, *The Black Jacobins* and Muñoz’s essay. On the page, these texts acquire the same weight for me. This chapter will read with, albeit sometimes implicitly, political theory, affect studies, theories on the rhizome, performativity and ephemerality within Junot Díaz’s literary imagination in order to reimagine creolization as something that occurred within and beyond the bounds of the plantation—before, during and after the Trujillato between the years 1930 and 1961—as a discursive, material and affective process that gives way for diaspora.

These historical effects are loaded with affect, with emotion and feeling, which are encapsulated both historically in the body of the slave, and literally within the literary archive of the plantation, also an ephemeral site. In the coming sections, I will read specifically for the manners in which the landscape of the plantation has

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<sup>13</sup> The Spanish, which James describes as the most “advanced” Europeans of their day, annexed the island and called it Hispaniola, which most people today now know as Haiti and the Dominican Republic (*Jacobins* 3-4). There, Europeans mixed with the indigenous population—the Carib and Taino peoples—in the most violent of manners: through rape and massacre. While the Portuguese were the first to engage in the New World slave trade in the 16th century, the island of Hispaniola was the first island in the West Indies to have received a massive import of African slaves. Only they, a people who had been kidnapped and enslaved, cultivated and developed the land the French would later call the jewel in their crown: the territory of créolité [creoleness]” *Creolization* is a term Glissant gave to this polyrhythmic process of racial and cultural mixing. (*Poetics* 63).

mutilating historical effects on the black body, and how these effects were replicated during the Trujillo regime, particularly on the body of the Haitian, Haitian-Dominican, or the Dominican of Haitian descent, all of whom remain affected by such reconfigurations of racial slavery. I invite you to consent with me as we explore the multiple affective angles from which we can approach this particular project of anti-blackness that has plagued what it means to be Caribbean since the inception of the Americas.

## **Ruin**

The plantation today can be witnessed on the sugarcane plantations of the Dominican Republic. There, on the grounds of the plantation, within its bounds, you will see that most of the field hands are black, either Haitian, Haitian-Dominican or Dominican of Haitian descent. Today, plantation labor is almost exclusively derived from the efforts of black people, still, 500 years after slavery was brought to the Americas. For the explorers and conquerors of the period, the Americas were presented as sites for enslavement, where the darkest corners of the psyche were allowed to manifest materially and surface most cruelly on the bodies of the slaves. The archipelago of the Caribbean, which receives most generously the open sea and the weight carried upon its waters, remains open. Trade with the external world is what the plantation depended its successes on; the exchange of bodies for goods and commodities, and the transformation of bodies into commodities, was legal, but it was also convenient and, therefore, exhausted. But, to imagine the Americas in this

context, we must think also of the landscape of the plantation, the premier site of enslavement and biopolitical experimentation.

In a chapter from *Poetics of Relation* titled “Closed Place, Open Word,” Glissant dialogues with Martiniquan writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, and posits that the plantation, which he capitalizes as the Plantation, constitutes “*the territory of creoleness*” (*Poetics* 63). He continues, “The Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation” (*Poetics* 65). These “present-day modes of Relation” could be read as modes of living in the world with a particular knowledge of the past and history’s grasp on the present. It could be said that these present-day modes of relation Glissant imagines are constituted by past modes of relation, for the modes of relation of the plantation began on the slave ship, and still manage to constitute “the lived experience” of Hypatía Belicia Cabral, a character in *Oscar Wao*, who I will take as a contemporary figure of black life under captivity; I read Belicia as an abject body that transforms herself from slave to fugitive, as so many slaves did before her, on the sugarcane field she was beaten into unconsciousness on that referentially shadows the landscape of the plantation. “For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea’s abysses, an exception” and I read this with respect to Belicia and all of us who identify with her characterization, “it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others,” writes Glissant in “Open Boat” (*Poetics* 8). “Relation,” he continues, “is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange” (*Poetics* 8). In other words, present-day modes of relation can be

understood through the field of exchange of the plantation as a porous circle, as inextricably dependent on the external world and global markets through trade, but also as an exchange of knowledge, or, I would argue, historical emotion.

I urge that the relations of the plantation be read by going into the archive that holds evidence in the forms of description and feelings. There, the close reader finds the modes of subjection repeatedly performed on the plantation through excessive labor and excessive force, torture and mutilation. In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James writes in detail about labor on the plantation. “The sugarcane plantations,” he writes, “demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour.” He follows his statement with an account of the kinds of intensive laborious efforts required of the slaves everyday:

Cane could be planted and would grow at any time of the year, and the reaping of one crop was the signal for the immediate digging of ditches and the planting of another. Once cut they had to be rushed to the mill lest the juice became acid by fermentation. The extraction of the juice and manufacture of the raw sugar went on for three weeks a month, 16 to 18 hours a day, for seven or eight months in the year. (*Jacobins* 10)

The extraction process, as you have read, does not discriminate the cane. Rather, every inch of the sugarcane plant is used in the production of sugar. In the boiling house, where the clarification process occurs, the shoots and leaves of the cane are used as fuel for the fire that boils the sugar down to crystals. Therefore, the sugarcane plantation relies on a system of production that seems self-contained, meaning every part of the plant is used for the production of its product. The seemingly contained composition of the plantation thus mimics the self-containment of its most valuable crop. In other words, the sugarcane plantation relies on a system of self-containment just as creolization was intended to occur on a self-contained site, the seemingly

closed circle of the plantation-as-container. But as we know, this self-containment was a myth. Indeed, during the colonization of the Caribbean, the development of the economy of the plantation system depended almost entirely on exchange, particularly slave labor, with sugar being the most exported crop of The Greater Antilles, and Africans, for a time, one of the most imported commodities. This is to say that production on the plantation dispossesses bodies of their value as it extracts other commodities from their movements, only further dispossessing slaves of belonging and having anything in the world except for, possibly, alterity.

Creolization is what happened during and after colonization: the biological and cultural (sexual, racial) mixing of Europeans with the native peoples of the Caribbean and the imported slaves of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Such creolization occurred through relentlessly oppressive means that actually altered the movements of the Creole slave, and their physical shape, through the repetition of dehumanizing methods of production, torture and mutilations. In *The Black Jacobins*, James writes, “worked like animals, the slaves were housed like animals,” living in windowless huts usually divided by partitions into two or three rooms (*Jacobins* 11). The huts were built around a square that ranged from 20-25 feet long, 12 feet wide and 15 feet in height, planted with provisions and fruits. Oftentimes there was only room for one bed, usually made out of straw, hides or cords on which mother, father, and children slept. The rations of food handed out at the onset of the week never lasted long, often leaving families with nothing to eat for the last half of the week. Planters encouraged the slaves to use their breaks for the cultivation of such crops as vegetables and raised chickens, further exhausting the body of the slave. This framed the body of the slave

as being incapable of feeling tired, which reduced them to machines of agricultural production.

Tired, ill and starving, the slaves were susceptible to diseases of epidemic proportions. This affected the production of sugar, which was met with still more brutal violence. “The slave received the whip with more certainty and regularity than they received food,” writes James. He continues, “it was the incentive to work and the guardian of discipline” (*Jacobins* 12). Speaking to this vicious cycle caused by the equalization of modes of subjection with modes of survival, James adds, “these bestial practices were normal features of slave life” (*Jacobins* 12). Here, James’ language attempts to approximate a discourse of “actual” suffering of (living) slaves.

I ask myself, then, what carried over the affect of such violence through expressive continuities? What are these feelings and emotions present in the language of creolization, which is to also say the language of the landscape of the plantation that makes possible a reimagining of the suffering of slaves? I would have to say, unflinchingly, that this is the function of the literary archive.

Through a particular combination of Glissant with Junot Díaz, whose syntax and character formations are not just objects that I am reading, but alterations of my strategies of reading, I aim to show how literature captures the feelings and emotions of the captive slave. Díaz, himself a reader of Glissant, uses much of Glissant’s language to describe the plantation in his novel. I find that the language in the novel that is used to depict space, particularly the landscape of the plantation, acquires a similar *topos* to the plantation that Glissant gives us in his descriptions in *Poetics of Relation*. This is to say that the syntax in Díaz’s novel offers strategies for reading the

topos of the plantation as a reformulation of the landscape of the plantation as ruins depicted in *Poetics of Relation* that exceeds the text's bookends. With Muñoz, I read the literatures of the plantation as eruptive presentations of the ephemeral texture of the plantation; these constitute alternative archives of feeling because of the transcendent quality of the language used to describe this particular site, and the alternate structures of feeling such depictions render. The language of this certain kind of literature then acquires a performativity that opens up the possibility of imagining the emotions of captives left buried in the plantation.

To help me adjust our reading in such a way, I will draw from Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) in order to consider her definition of repetitive strain injuries (RSIs) alongside the movement of affect on the landscape of the plantation as it buries the body's feelings into the ground (145). I argue that the regulative norms imposed on slave life that repeat some gestures and not others function as a means of orienting the slave's body in some directions and not others, which actually contorts the body of the slave and contains their own choreography of self (*Emotion* 145). In another context, the slaves who receive the whip that James accounts for in the chapter titled "The Property" are in effect twisted into shapes that enabled some action insofar as they restricted any capacity for other kinds of actions. Therefore, the practice of enslavement was also a matter of "impressions," of how bodies are "impressed upon" by the world that makes them other (*Emotion* 145). Hence, the various applications of slave laws actually surface on the bodies they orient.

If repeated enough, and as we shall see with the character of Belicia in Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, the excess of violence actually exceeds the epidermis, the violent effects of which reveal the impossibility of subjectivity for the slave as it is reduced to the bits and pieces of ruptured flesh that constitute the body of the slave. Further, this excessive violence shows that the psyche was as exposed to the destructive violence of racial slavery as the body was; that it, along with the body, could be beaten into nothingness or something else altogether. Thus, the affect of enslavement, as a direct correlative to the modes of relation constituted by a plantation-based society, is also one of the plantation's modes of exchange, which always occurs at the expense of the captive Black body. This ultimately renders an exchange of affect that is generated by the structures of feeling sparked by creolization on the ruinous grounds of the landscape of the plantation, where the exchange of affect, along with the exchange of goods with the external world, collapse the seemingly impenetrable boundary of the closed circle of the plantation.

### **Marronage**

Early on in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant defines creolization as “not merely an encounter, a shock...a métissage, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry.” He goes on to explain that this métissage is limitless, “its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable,” and that the most obvious symbol of this relational process is the Creole language, which is never fixed “except to systems of variables” made more variable in the

varying performances of the obedient slave (*Poetics* 34).” In other words, creolization also became a mode of flight, escape in the form of marronage.<sup>14</sup>

In his essay “Derek Walcott: Imagination, Nation and the Poetics of Memory” (2002), Rowan Ricardo Phillips explains the landscape of the Caribbean as a region that continually affirms and deceives. According to Phillips, this “implies a diurnal discord between dissolution/ruin and resuscitation/renewal” (126). When read alongside Glissant’s descriptions of the Creole language, life on the plantation becomes an act of culturally and historically diffractive and erratic adaptability, And through this knowledge of the shared root, or rather the shared knowledge of the root, the creolized Caribbean becomes a continuous poetics of both structure and depth, a combined passion of oppression and regeneration of an uncertain creolization that exceeds the plantation’s borders; this produces what I would call an ‘affective relationality of expressive continuities’ that penetrates boundaries, limitations and restrictions forced upon the body (*Poetics* 24-5).

The political feelings implied above gave way to an extraordinarily human bravery: some slaves fled into the woods, holding secret meetings before initiating fugitive acts of escape. As slaves endured and witnessed the consequences of marronage, they developed other modes of resistance through their affected speech. As a means of adapting to the brutality of slave life, many slaves adopted fatalism and nonsense into their language and behaviors out of a deeply instilled fear so as to avoid punishment. I would argue that political feelings in the form of affected language become a form of flight for the captive body: the flight of the slave being there and

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<sup>14</sup> In 1963, James hints at what Glissant in 1997 terms “marronage” in *Poetics of Relation*, what he calls the “elsewhere” of the woods as “detour,” a “discontinuity” of the now porous circle of the plantation (*Poetics* 68).

elsewhere through language, of obeying as a mask of linguistic defiance, “darkskinned but clearly her family’s daughter,” as Yuniors narrates in the section of the novel titled “The Burning” after La Inca finds Belicia in captivity (*Oscar Wao* 258).

I will move between such conceptions of speech and emotions (through our understanding of political feelings), which will be made possible through a definition of speech that stems from a combination of James and Glissant, along with James’ and Muñoz’s reconstructions of the historical archive; within this conception of the archive, I read for the historical emotions James hints at in the preface to his book, together with a notion of emotion derived from Ahmed’s theorizing on feelings and Muñoz’s theory on the ephemeral that I explored in the previous section of this chapter. In this particular section, I look at Joan Anim-Addo’s essay “Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect” (2013) together with Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1997) and Muñoz’s “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts” (1997) in order to show how the slave performs role of the obedient slave through linguistic disguise, and how these deferred and disguised speech acts constituted a performance of resistance against racialized slavery on the plantation.

This shift in the language of the slave could be read as an affective shift of the political feelings and emotions caused by the horrors of slave life. In other words, the “Relation of the Plantation” is a relation of various forms of creolized speech and censored political feelings and emotions produced as a result of the affect of racial slavery’s oppressive mechanisms and engendering forces. In her essay, Joan Anim–

Addo, a distinguished professor of Caribbean literature at Goldsmiths, states the following about the affect of creolization:

Key to an understanding of the creolising of affect is that the power of speech was not granted to the enslaved. Furthermore, since to speak is to render one's thoughts open for inspection, such a potentially dangerous practice for the enslaved or subjugated offers up a masking through silence, as both a refuge and a space of possible protection, less open to continued misinterpretation. ("Gendering Creolisation" 14)

No power was granted to the slave, let alone the power of speech. The slaves, therefore, could not establish an "I," through which they could articulate their "true" inner subjectivity. Neither could this articulation of the "I" become the process of interpretation that any object in the slave's field of vision may be interpellated by. They could not dialogically distinguish themselves from the objects around them, which only emphasized their reduction to tools in the dehumanizing process of enslavement that made them property. Since to speak rendered their thoughts for inspection and their bodies susceptible to the whip, the slaves masked themselves with silence—and creolized speech—for refuge and protection. This deferred or disguised speech to avert the whip became a way of life for the Creole slave, a disguised expression of her subjectivity that lagged and deferred as each one failed to fully capture her being. Hence, modes of oppression became modes of survival for the Creole slave.

In his essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" (1997), José Muñoz provides insight to the particular definition of performance I have used to base my understanding of the Plantation as a site of polyvalent performance ("Ephemera" 6). Rooted in this performance of disguise and secrecy, in this

combination of potentialities, I would argue, is an occasion for a political doing (“Ephemera” 6). I use the word polyvalent to invoke Muñoz’s language, but also to stress the particular definition of performance I use in this chapter, which I regard as being that which has a relative capacity to reunite, react or interact with power. This strain of performance is also a form of resistance. To this end, I read Glissant’s descriptions of “oral expression” for the performativity of the plantation that lies within that specific domain of speech for the slave:

Direct, elementary speech, articulating the rudimentary language necessary to get work done; stifled speech, corresponding to the silence of this world in which knowing how to read and write is forbidden; deferred or disguised speech, in which men and women who are gagged keep their words close. The Creole language integrated these three modes and made them jazz. (*Poetics* 73)

In this passage from “Closed Place, Open Word,” Glissant depicts the Creole language as strong in its attachment to variability, in its dependence on fluidity between structures, in its “jazz,” which colonization imposed in its structure, acquires a durable elasticity even as it is never fixed in its terms. The Creole language, the formative structures of Caribbean consciousness, breaks down through linguistic disguise and “nonsense” into the “direct, elementary speech” of “rudimentary language necessary to get work done.” Thus, the speech used on the field is different from the speech in the domestic space of the slave quarters where they prepared for their roles, or rather realities as obedient slave hands. It wasn’t however, that the Creole language integrated these three modes of speech—rudimentary, silenced, disguised—so much as those bodies who were prohibited from learning how to read and write because of oppression had to develop a different relationship to language. I would argue that the structure of feeling generated by oppression actually compacted

the various forms of political feelings it generated through affect similarly to how such forms of violence altered the bodies of the enslaved. The effect of this then was a muting of the slave's capacity to express her subjectivity orally through speech. Thus, the slaves were forced to reside in this break of language. Hunched over their own bodies in whatever which way, the slaves had no other option but to drown in the relational sea of a diffracted language, literally becoming the broken words they utter.

The close reading I have done of Glissant so far suggests that slave life is somewhat constituted by the slave's performance of a racialized subjectivity that has been imposed on his body through the process of creolization. In other words, the plantation, as the experimental grounds of racial slavery, enables the performance of enslaved subjects, but at the same time does not allow for it. The silencing mechanisms of such slave laws altered the language of the Creole slaves and forced them to use disguise as a mode of survival under the watchful eyes of the overseer. According to Glissant, these phonic alterations constituted performative acts that were codified types of expression (*Poetics* 73). Thus, the deferral, disguise, and performativity of the Creole language were integrated through creolization, which also became a form of flight within the forced stasis of slave life as an imposed structure of containment. I would argue that it is through a broken-down language representative of a people who have also been broken that the ruins of the plantation start to become detectable.

The manifestation of this brokenness occurs when the creolized slave subject, by moving around the rule of silence, gains an insurgent ground on which to walk on through the internalization of modes of suffering as modes of survival. However,

silence is what caused the transformation of the slave that laid the groundwork for the insurgence of a diffracted creolization in the form of political feelings that could not be articulated on the plantation grounds, which made their bodies carriers of impossible emotions, of residual feelings that took up space inside as much as they do outside. To harken back to my statement about locating an act of political doing within these forms of resistance for the slave performing secrecy and linguistic disguise, I locate an alternate sense of self-knowing in the slave, a mode of sociality and relationality, a consciousness that has been queered and is often transmitted covertly, to stress the medical register in Muñoz's writing, under the watchful eye of the master.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant refers to creolization as a métissage, which he considers to be limitless, "its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable" (*Poetics* 34). This conception of creolization acquires an uncertainty, which I associate with ephemerality and the risks and stakes of a somewhat theatrical, yet very real performance. Indeed, Glissant continues by contending that the Creole language is the most symbolic of the uncertain process of métissage. Within this gamble of possibilities is the possibility of the slave, through the performance of the obedient self, to transform the métissage at the level of the speech act into a limitless (and therefore transcendent) force through the transference of energy in the form of affective political feelings that occurs as a result of creolization. Thus, creolization is localized in the body of the slave and generates "a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry like a hurricane as it

moves across the ocean in order to crash on the shore and cause more ruin.<sup>15</sup> The uncertainty of place and belonging, or rather the consent to not belong to one place and therefore not be a single being, but rather a force of the very modes of subjection that oppress the body of the slave, is congruent to the ephemerality of the landscape of the plantation once it has surfaced on the body of the slave.

Just as Glissant's poetic lyricism depicts the plantation as a relational site of creolization within and beyond its bounds, as a composition of limitless if not explosive métissage and diffraction, so does Yunior, the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, when he afflicts his description of the landscape of the plantation with a flesh-eating disease of métissage, which I would argue is the residual affect of creolization. The reader traces the transformation of the plantation by following the movements of a captive Belicia before she is beaten on the sugarcane field:

At one point they passed through one of those godforsaken blisters of a community that frequently afflict the arteries between the major cities, sad assemblages of shacks that seem to have been deposited in situ by a hurricane or other such calamity. (*Oscar Wao* 135)

Here, I read the "other such calamity" as the Western colonization of the islands of the Caribbean, which, with the force of a hurricane, "deposits" "sad assemblages of shacks" beyond the bounds of the plantation. This shows the forces of development and underdevelopment that make up the myth of modernity in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato, revealing the plantations interdependence with the external world, emphasizing the "not-so-separateness" of those outmoded spots that

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<sup>15</sup> Yunior recounts what The Gangster feels about Belicia's scar on her back that reminds him of a hurricane, "He didn't care about the burn scars on her back: It looks like a painting of a ciclón and that's what you are, mi negrita, una tormenta en la madrugada," a storm in the late hours of the night. (*Oscar Wao* 127)

function as the *inbetween*, the buffers between the plantation and the major cities the plantation system develops with an economy bent on urbanization. Creoleness, according to Glissant, was most visible here on the edges of the plantation because of the intensification of marronage. It is there, on the edge of the plantation, in these “blisters of a community” where the slave transformed from a captive body to a fugitive on the run, where blackness combined with rebellion and revolution to create an insurgent ground of the plantation.

The landscape of the plantation in the passage above takes the form of the fugitive slave’s mutilated body when she enters the world beyond the plantation grounds and carries with her the affliction of blackness, which holds the violence of racialized slavery. Therefore, the composite of broken structures that make up the “sad assemblages of shacks” around major cities is the plantation reformulated beyond its grounds, where the container cannot withstand the explosive creoleness in the form of the fugitive that it aims to repress and contain (*Oscar Wao* 135). The pressures of the plantation’s airtight seal bursts open the bounds of the Plantation, making room in the breaches for the pervasive flow of the expressive continuities of creolization. And when the oppression of racial slavery couldn’t prohibit the development of a creolized Caribbean culture, as it inevitably did, the container, as we have seen within Glissant and Díaz’s writing, explodes, producing a wasteland of a proliferation of different processes of creolization occurring simultaneously.

Thus, in the novel, the structures of the system of the plantation collapse onto each other and erupt into blisters, which are then ruptured by the reconfigurations of racial slavery that beat down on the collective black body during the Trujillato. It is

also proven that the Western model of the plantation-as-container fails to fully contain the relations of creolization and anti-blackness that are rooted both within the circle of the plantation and outside in the external world, rendering porous the seemingly closed circle of the plantation. However, what needs to be reiterated here is that the ground has become a repository of historical feelings, and that through this, the literature of the plantation and its language constitute performative acts of unearthing these feelings; such textual maneuvering gives us insight, of a more visceral kind, that locates a plantation within the body of the slave that is beaten down onto the ground, such as the near fatal beating Belicia endures in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (145-8).

### **Body Memory**

I will now return to Glissant's *Poetics* and relate it to José Muñoz's "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," both of which were published in 1997. The plantation described and exhausted in this chapter isn't the plantation in the real. It isn't even a referent of the plantation backed by explicitly historical truths. Instead, I am engaging with the plantation as an ephemeral site that remains, as the ruins of the performance of a plantation literature of memory.

Glissant turns to literature in his writing of *Poetics of Relation* because it gives him figures that convey the life of emotions on the plantation. Among these ruins of the plantation, three forms of expression took shape: literary production as survival; delusion; and finally, a passion of memory (*Poetics* 68). Glissant continues, "After the System collapsed the literatures that had asserted themselves within its

space developed, for the most part, from the general traits so sketchily indicated here, either consenting to them or taking an opposite course” (*Poetics* 71). These literatures that sprouted out of creolization privileged the symbolism of situations over the refinement of realisms, and in doing so, encompassed, transcended and shed light upon the plantation's “obscurities and breaks” (*Poetics* 71). This made the plantation a site of transcendence, a stage upon which bodies were controlled and contained, repressed and repossessed; and this repetitive depositing of affect that the slave collects on and in her body; the body of the slave becomes the transcendent trances and glimmers of the violence of creolization that spatiotemporally render porous the seemingly closed circle of the plantation. Thus, what remains of the plantation—the life of emotions, survival, delusion, memory, “obscurities and breaks”—constitutes what is ephemeral about the landscape of the plantation. It is because of the breaking down of the slave through oppressive creolization that the affective circuit could also show how the body then begins to function as the landscape of the plantation in the form of a transcendent creolization, which can now be read on the body of the slave. This is to say that the grounds that previously buried the political feelings of the insurgent slave have become the broken back of the slave.

“And it’s not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything,” narrates Yunió about Trujillo’s lack of a paper trail (*Oscar Wao* 243). A historicist would dissuade me from doing such a connection of the plantation with the ephemeral. Such theorists as Jared Sexton would regard racism and white supremacy as emotionless dehumanizing processes, instead advocating for an investigation of the language of the law so as to no flatten out the existence of those bodies that suffer. However, I

find that this need to tie the plantation to ephemerality is another approach to the human as a mode of reparative performance that aims to acknowledge the historical emotions James has given a language to in *The Black Jacobins*. Therefore, the necessity—this includes feelings of longing, yearning, desire—that so often are used to determine our uncertain futures through our own imagination, to constitute the futurity of our peoples, becomes, through a combination of ontology with historical emotions, the archives of our modernity. This move to James and Muñoz is not to deviate from the violence inflicted on the body, but “to see into the very bones” of this violence of anti-black racism that makes “the lived experience” of the slave impossible to fully recover in actuality (*Jacobins xi*).

In the section titled “Abelard in Chains” in the fifth chapter of the novel, Yuniors narrates, “What’s certain is that nothing is certain.” Curiously using a similar language, Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* provides a strategy of seeing into the very bones of these forms of violence:

Let us, nonetheless, consult these ruins with their uncertain evidence, their extremely fragile moments, their frequently incomplete, obliterated, or ambiguous archives. You can guess already what we are to discover: that the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable. (*Poetics 65*)

What he calls for in this passage, even though he never explicitly words it in such a way, is a hesitation with the residues of historical emotions caused by the historical effects of the violence sustained within the ruins of the landscape of the plantation; those very ruins of the plantation that caused the ruination of the slave’s “uncertain

evidence, their extremely fragile moments, their frequently incomplete, obliterated, or ambiguous archive” (*Poetics* 65). Without knowing it, Glissant was actually advancing James’ concern for historical emotions.

Similar to Muñoz’s definition of ephemera, where he emphasizes the scholarly function of performance as something that discusses an object-subject’s ontology (and ephemera as what remains of that performance), Glissant directs us to the “uncertain evidence” of the slave. In this capacity, the traces of the ruinous landscape of the plantation become ephemeral. Therefore, the performance of literature when it depicts such figures, becomes useful in seeing the continuity between the slave and the plantation, who in away, have become two sides of the same “spectral coin” that Yuniors in the archive of *Oscar Wao* describes as those leaves in the dark of night that have been illuminated by the moon (*Oscar Wao* 146). In this moment in the narration, Yuniors asserts that the moon’s activity the day of Belicia’s near-fatal beating “has been reported” to shine a light on the leaves of eucalyptus trees. The moon’s light as a symbol of knowledge, however, becomes an allusion to performance in that the *doing* in which this certain variation of knowledge engages in is the act of shedding light upon darkness, to cast into spectral coin, into visibility, the landscape of the plantation; this is where the body of the slave acquires a body memory of its physical impressions on the body and the residual affect of such violent effects.

I will return to the passage cited above after I introduce the manner in which Díaz engages with a literature of memory, which I will do alongside Glissant. Returning to *Poetics of Relation*, I find that Glissant hints at what I take to be a

performativity of memory. Depicting for us the literature of the plantation that runs counter to the expressive continuities he finds within Creole oral expressions and literatures, Glissant posits that Creole literature that opposed the dominant discourse of the Caribbean at the time, “went against the convention of a falsely legitimizing landscape scenery and conceived of landscape as basically implicated in a story, in which it too was a vivid character” (*Poetics* 71).<sup>16</sup>

I read Junot Diaz’s writings as a form of creolized Caribbean literature that conceives of the plantation as implicated in the archive of the Cabral family, and which he personifies through his depictions of Trujillo as an embodiment of the structure of the landscape, who also treated the Dominican Republic, we know, as his own plantation (*Oscar Wao* 225). Here, Yunió’s characterization of the plantation, like the body memory of the plantation landscape as it creates an insurgent ground, goes through its own form of creolization-as-flight: the Dominican Diaspora that gained momentum throughout the modernization (and brutal underdevelopment of those living in the country) of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo regime between 1930 and 1961. In this reading of a literature of memory, the ruins of the landscape of

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<sup>16</sup> Glissant posits that the colonist writers—many of whom were Planters and travelers—who lived on or visited the Plantations of the Caribbean were possessed with a real need to legitimize the fantasy of this (delusional and contradictory) system of agricultural production. They did so out of an even more pressing psychic need to distance themselves from the savage violence of racial slavery that maintained their gluttonous consumption of expensive foods and goods. With delusions of grandeur, the literature produced exoticized the landscape of the Plantation, fantasizing the reality of its characteristics. The discourse of Plantation life constructed an image through language that functioned as “a disguised apology rather than that of an austere realism” (*Poetics* 70). He further outlines the conditions of this exoticization by providing that the gentleness and beauty of the conventional landscape of the Caribbean were pushed to such extremes that the brutalities of the conditions of Plantation life were covered up. James provides an account of one Vaublanc, whom was a contemporary observer of the Plantation and describes “scenes of idyllic beauty” (*Jacobins* 14). After a shuddering description of a plantation on which there were no prisons, dungeons, or punishments, he concludes, “The slaves... had light work to do and were happy to do it” (*Jacobins* 14). What culminated from this dominant discourse was an active blotting out of the shudders of enslaved life, an act of smudging the Plantation’s “turbulent” realities (*Poetics* 70).

the plantation, the embodied creolization of the slave, and marronage, all become strategies of remembering the plantation as well as departing from it. For writers of Creole literature, Glissant points out, “But the truth is that their concern, its driving force and hidden design, is the derangement of the memory, which determines, along with imagination, our only way to tame time,” writes Glissant (*Poetics* 71). This is the performative act of remembrance that renders the Plantation as a site of such performance and the literature produced thereafter as what remains of that relation. The plantation, to transplant the words of Rowan Ricardo Phillips from his essay “Derek Walcott: Imagination, Nation and the Poetics of Memory” (2002), “remains a site of imminent and ruinous difficulty” (*Imagination* 129). As a reader of affect as a form of structural and bodily ruin, I want to feel with that difficulty.

As we have seen, Junot Díaz provides an alternative archive of Dominican history, one that is not only based on the regurgitation of empirical violence, but also based heavily on remembering the ruins of the landscape of the plantation, and the historical effects that took the form of political feelings and historical emotions on and beyond the plantation grounds. Indeed, the sugarcane field is evoked many times in Díaz’s novel and places the Plantation within our conception of the present as we read along the text. By its repetition, the sugarcane field invokes the Plantation as a constant reminder of the terror that makes today and tomorrow possible. I, as a ‘readerly’ subject, am very much a product of Díaz and Muñoz, conjoining the ephemeral with the dialectics of empirical evidence through a concern for the reparation of ontology, or rather the ante-ontological totality of blackness. This, for me, is another mode of reading for, and thus remembering, humanity.

As Hortense Spillers argues throughout her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), what is missing from the archive is the black female slave’s insurgence. That uncertainty is why the ephemeral is useful because what we are confronted with is not a comprehensive record that accounts for what goes on to the slave, but the traces and glimmers of a suffering that has been silenced, flattened out and hidden. It is because of that uncertainty in the evidence of their suffering, in the impossibility that stems from the impossibility of their subject-positions that I turn to ephemerality as a mode of reading the plantation. During the anticipatory drive over to the sugarcane field where Belicia is to be beaten to the point of death, Yuniors describes what Belicia sees beyond the car mirror that separates her from the external world:

They drove east. In those days the cities hadn’t yet metastasized into kaiju, menacing one another with smoking, teeming tendrils of shanties; in those days, their limits were a Corbusian dream; the urban dropped off, as precipitous as a beat, one second you were deep in the twentieth century, (well, the twentieth century of the Third World) and the next you’d find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane. The transition between states was some real-time machine-type shit. The moon, it has been reported, was full, and the light that rained down cast the leaves of the eucalyptuses into spectral coin. (*Oscar Wao* 146)

The drive east is a drive into the past situated visibly in the present, where the city begins to resemble the days in which “urban” wasn’t a concept, plunged backward in time 180 years into rolling fields of cane. This marks the presence of the plantation in the twentieth century, placing it within the evolved fields of modernity. The cities had not yet metastasized; from the perspective of modern development, they have not yet fully formed. The smoking, teeming tendrils of shanties add to the haze of the memory of the plantation, which materializes before Belicia’s eyes. The movement of

the drive then resembles the temporality of memory as one orients one's body backward in the present in order to encounter again the traumas of the past, which is to locate those structures of feelings that generate trauma.

In the section "Ephemera and Feeling" of his essay, Muñoz explores Raymond Williams's notion of "structures of feelings" in his discussion about material dimensions of ephemera. These structures of feeling are what Williams and Muñoz take to be art that conveys, translates and engenders, tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being solid as most epistemological knowledge require. "Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, writes Muñoz, "is firmly anchored within the social" ("Ephemera" 10). He continues that for Williams "a structure of feeling is a process of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art" ("Ephemera" 10). If this is so, then ephemerality becomes useful means of accessing that the relation between body and landscape in Díaz's fiction.

I locate an ephemeral texture to these representations of the plantation, especially within Yunió's narrative with respect to what remains of the performance of the slave on the plantation. Muñoz sheds light on the specific forms the ephemeral texture of the plantation takes. I would ask my reader to think of the plantation as a signifier of this following description:

I want to take some time to reflect on what I'm calling ephemera as modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence that, far from filtering materiality out of cultural studies, reformulates and expands our understandings of materiality. Ephemera, as I am using it here, is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but

is instead interested in following the traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.” (“Ephemera” 10)

What remains are ruins, scattered huts, assemblages of scattered lives and broken bodies beyond the bounds of the plantation, a sertão, a wasteland of modernity. These are the bodies that carry with them the archive of the plantation with their flesh and their memories, the traces, glimmers, residues and specks of oppressed and vibrant life. Oftentimes, these memories take the form of flesh, altering the imprints and movements of their bodies in life and in the narrative. This is the relational and affective attachment the Caribbean person has to the plantation and the aftermath of colonization. It is this affect that drives “the effort or passion of memory” in Glissant’s writing and the performance on the plantation that illuminates the mechanisms that grind the gears of affective relations, of effort and passion. Thus, within the universe of domination and oppression of the plantation, forms of humanity persisted and the plantation became a container of archives of both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Caribbean literatures implemented “processes of intensification, breathlessness, digression, and immersion of individual psychology within the drama of a common destiny (*Poetics* 71). All the while, works such as Yuniors archive conceive of a landscape as implicated in a story, in which the landscape of the plantation becomes its most vivid character. So, the plantation, the site of creolization, becomes a literary site of remembrance, an agent of not forgetting the rules of silence imposed on the enslaved body. These literatures of memory present the reader with what Lauren Berlant terms—in her book of the same title—a “cruel optimism,” where the Caribbean writer experiences a double-bind: the Caribbean

writer is attached affectively to the object that is also an obstacle for her freedom, which keeps her from being free from the ephemeral hold of the plantation in the psyches of Caribbean peoples even after diaspora. It is the goal of the Caribbean writer then to remain in the break the circle of iron, even as the ephemeral historical emotions of suffering have transcended generations and moved further away from the real of that particular moment in history.

“So, finally,” writes Glissant, “historical *marronage* intensified over time to exert a creative *marronage*, whose numerous forms of expression began to form the basis for a continuity” (*Poetics* 71). In other words, with this tracing, the expressive forms of Caribbean literature, whether in English, Spanish, French or Creole, began to form the basis for continuity through “the derangement of the memory, which determines, along with imagination, our only way to tame time” (*Poetics* 71). Here, the continuity between the lived experience of slaves on the plantation grounds and those fugitives beyond its bounds may be read in literature as the archives of emotions that constitute the body of the runaway slave, who carried an ephemeral plantation on her back.

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The spatiotemporal shifts caused by historical and creative *marronage*, and the Dominican Diaspora contributed to the cultural development of an Afro-Dominican consciousness that resembles the creolization discussed by Glissant, even as antihaitianismo contributed, and still contributes, to the underdevelopment of Haitians, Haitian-Dominican and Haitian-American peoples today. This chapter, I hope, has shown how the mechanisms of secrecy and disguise employed by the slave

render her existence a series of performances of race, consciousness and resistance that constituted political acts and feelings, which ultimately rendered porous the boundaries of the plantation.

Through a queer (performative and reparative) critique, the formation of a Dominicadad during the Trujillato and the ensuing diaspora mimics the formation of a creolized consciousness; therefore, Afro-Dominican consciousness acquires a resistant and oftentimes defiant consciousness formation that discursively and performatively resembles the erratic movements and orientations of bodies and psyches on and off the plantation that made it a site of both ruin and polyvalent performance. Thus, the Afro-Caribbean—as characterized by the narrator Yuniór de las Casas and his somewhat fantasmic mother Belicia Cabral in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, both of whom I go on to read as holding queerness—becomes violence and beauty in the archive.

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## II

### “You can never run away.” Captivity, Fugitivity and The Circle

*Fukú part three. But most folks figured that she had sold the girl to some other family. Back then, as now, the buying and selling of children, common enough.*

*But if these years have taught me anything, it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.*

– Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*<sup>17</sup>

In Chapter 1, I demonstrate how the slave in the Caribbean, as figured in literature, becomes an archive of historical emotion and political feelings in a process of creolization that has been localized on the body. During the extreme subjection of the captive body in a process of dehumanization, the slave, through time, developed methods of survival within these oppressive forces of creolization on the seemingly closed circle of the plantation. I argue, through Glissant, Muñoz and Díaz’s writings, that creolization, the inevitable and brutally violent consequence of racial slavery on an island in the Caribbean, is replicated in the lived experience of the Creole slave, and becomes a mode of flight right there on the grounds of the plantation through secrecy and disguise.

Furthermore, the performance of the role of the obedient slave rendered creolization performative at the level of the speech act. It is within the individual speech acts of the slave that I locate a resistance. Therefore, following this argument, the body of the slave in the process of marronage becomes an embodied performance

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<sup>17</sup> The first passage is excerpted from the section “The Third and Final Daughter of the fifth chapter of the novel, “Poor Abelard: 1944-1946” (*Oscar Wao* 253). The second passage is from Lola’s narration at the beginning of Part II of the novel.

of historical emotion and political feelings. Once in the break that consists of that intensification of creolized affect, the body of the slave, in crossing the porous circle of the plantation—I reference here Yuniór’s use of “The Circle” as a metaphor of Glissant’s imagery—transforms into an archive, a living repository of the affects of the plantation. In this chapter, I treat *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as Creole literature, and Hypatía Belicia Cabral, the mother and carrier of la familia Cabral, as a character who represents the figure of the Creole slave in captivity.

Let us take the passages that I have chosen as the beginning of my second chapter as the extravagant truths that they are. The first passage not only alludes to this chapter being the third part of the fukú of anti-black racism, but also asserts the existence of racial slavery in the context of the Trujillo regime. The girl Yuniór refers to in the excerpt is Hypatía Belicia Cabral, who, after the death of her immediate family, is sold by her relatives to strangers for a life of dehumanization in the form of captivity and enslavement. Her captors live in Outer Azua, a wasteland that is marked by the ruins of the landscape of the plantation I discussed in Chapter 1. She was sold and “became a criada, a restavek,” sentenced to a servant life, living “anonymously among the poorest sectors on the Island, never knowing who her real people were, and subsequently she was lost from sight for a long long time” (*Oscar Wao* 253). Belicia, who I would argue Yuniór envisions as a kind of Amabelle Desir in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* (1998), is representative of the help, those house servants who are either smuggled across the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, or born into a family who serves the ideal family of Trujillo’s Dominican

Republic, those light-skinned civilians whose duty is to perpetuate the violence of antihaitianismo. I will return to the second passage later on in this chapter.

Similar to the maneuvering I have done in the previous chapters, I aim to contribute to a discourse that exposes and critiques anti-blackness through a combination of an affective, which is to say queer, reading of Junot Díaz's fiction, that also employs epistemological approaches to thinking of how the law protects anti-black racism. I am thinking here of theorists such as Jared Sexton. In this chapter, I draw my argument from several important essays in Black Studies: Hortense Spillers' essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Jared Sexton's "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery" (2010), Fred Moten's "The Subprime and the Beautiful" (2010), and Darieck Scott's book titled *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010). These works have provided a rubric of language and theory from which I have gained an understanding of how racial slavery is reconfigured by the state in a contemporary context.

This chapter is also influenced, as the others are, by José Muñoz's theory on the ephemeral in his essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes on Queer Acts" (1997). My queer reading of the novel occupies an evocative space between the various arguments present in the works I have alluded to above. By employing a specific definition of performance that Johnson and I find useful, I aim to draw many relations among them. In "'Quare' Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother" (2001), Johnson responds to anthropologist Victor Turner's definition of theories of performance, which for him

“take into account the context and historical moment of performance” (*Black Queer Studies* 138). When read alongside Scott, Johnson’s definition of performance provides a structure for reading the performance of blackness as abjection as also one of queerness. Indeed, as both a Diasporic and queer subject, I find a profound queerness in the novel’s display of blackness as both a site of uncertain ephemerality and a site of “extravagant abjection,” a term I borrow from Darieck Scott. Yunior’s composition of an ephemeral structure of feeling in the form of a queer archive constitutes a political doing that makes his process of composition a performance of resistance, of political feeling in various forms of language. (“Ephemera as Evidence” 6)

As I discuss in Chapter 1, this ephemeral structure of feeling takes the ruinous shape of the landscape of the plantation as its model. In a section titled “Santo Domingo Confessional” of the fifth chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior provides a lengthy introduction to La Era de Trujillo for the reader (224-227). Yunior does so most effectively when he compares Trujillo’s Dominican Republic to Mordor, the region of Middle-earth in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, with mountain ranges surrounding it on three sides:

Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor; not only did he lock the country away from the rest of the world, isolate it behind the Plátano Curtain, he acted like it was his very own plantation, acted like he owned everything and everyone, killed whomever he wanted to kill, sons, brothers, fathers, mothers, took women away from their husbands on their wedding nights and then would brag publicly about “the great honey moon” he’d had the night before. (*Oscar Wao* 224-5)

Trujillo’s domination of this Caribbean country was also a form of isolation: the mountain ranges that serve as Mordor’s protection against the enemy here take the

form of an impenetrable curtain made out of the Dominican cuisine's staples: the plátano or green banana. Perhaps it is more than a mere coincidence that the word resembles so closely the word "plantation." Indeed, I as well as Yuniors, would probably suggest so.

If I read the Dominican Republic of the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a plantation in the context of the novel—as Yuniors does in the fifth chapter—then the recurrence and invocation of the figure of the slave during captivity through the characterization of Belicia historically situates her performance of captivity within the context of Trujillo's performance of the plantation. To say that the Trujillato's spatial constriction of the Island performs the plantation is to also say that the insurgent black body of Belicia is cast in the role of the captive body. In the section of the archive titled "Fukú vs. Zafa," Belicia reaches the end of the sugarcane field and collapses on the road in front of a moving bus filled with musicians; she is not only escaping from the chokehold of the fukú, but also escaping from the plantation (*Oscar Wao* 152). Therefore, Belicia's fugitivity reinforces through repetition the violence of racial slavery done in epic proportions on the plantations of the New World since colonization.

Hypatía Belicia Cabral, who can be read, in part, as Junot Díaz's homage to Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved* (1987), carries the traumas of her past on her back. Her character functions as a reminder of the bodies of those slaves whose backs not only carry the weight of the violence of the plantation, but also are altered by the landscape of the plantation that exceeds the porous circle of its bounds. She is entangled by the impossibility of her abjection that had always already been her

position during the makings of the Diaspora, which is also to say the Trujillato. Her body, the archive of such impossibility, actually alters space by moving the violence she endures on the sugarcane field into spaces such as the household, both in the Dominican Republic and New Jersey. Therefore, she carries the excess of violence into the domestic space. This generates a particular structure of feeling in the home that affects not only Belicia, but her children as well. The porousness of the Diaspora resides in this generational transcendent quality of the excess of violence carried by the body of the migrant who has taken flight during and after the Trujillato. Said plainly, Belicia carries the plantation in the scar across her back into the diaspora, into the future life she'll make with her children, Lola and Oscar.

Both in *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the movements of the Black Dominican mother during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century are traceable as bodies that carry the residual affect of the historical effects of the plantation. By tracing the movements and orientations of Belicia's body that carries with her the excess of racial and sexual violence of an anti-black dictatorship, the reader is provided with a rubric from which to better dissect the mechanics of the reconfigured operations and applications of racialized slavery that exceed into the 21<sup>th</sup> century, as Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton and Fred Moten all discuss, if from different angles. Such tracing also reveals the microforms of the violence of captivity that get reproduced in the domestic sphere, and affect her children Oscar and Lola, as well as her granddaughter, Isis. This is also true in *Drown*, where the movements of Yunior's mother reveal modes of subjection that remind me of captivity, and actually shape Yunior's coming-of-age.

In this chapter, I will mostly focus on Belicia and her daughter Lola to argue that the particular structure of feeling produced by the excess of violence of captivity generates the potential for resistance in the form of escape in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I would argue, however, that these reformulations of the violence of anti-black racism, are, in more ways than not, inescapable. Hence, the home as we think of it is impossible to attain for the migratory Dominican subject.

### **Flesh and Flight**

Thinking alongside James, Glissant and Díaz as I do in the first chapter, I argue that the ephemeral landscape of the plantation is also located within the ruinous landscape constituted by the ruptured flesh of the slave, who is exemplified by characters such as Belicia. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers describes the body of the captive female as both “a private and public space,” a “point of convergence [for] biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological” forces (67). It is a body that has been reduced to a thing, “becoming *being* for the captor” (67). This is to say that her ontology, her human beginning, has been replaced with a narrative of captivity. What this means is that the slave’s ontology has been cast as anti-ontological alongside the dominant ontological formation of the captive body as slave through the process of captivity. Belicia, as a captive female body, is dispossessed of her reproductive capabilities, her womb stolen for the reproduction of enslavement. Her body no longer a mode of being for her, Belicia’s captive female body becomes a site for the reconfiguration of racial slavery in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Jared Sexton's essay "People-of-Color-Blindness" engages with the works of Saidiya Hartman and Achille Mbembe to conceive of the captive female body within a contemporary context of late capitalism and globalization. For Sexton, this body is the site of terror formation. He considers the Black body to be, through a careful outlining of Hartman's and Mbembe's words, a combinational site of captivity (the state of siege), biopower (the state's repossession of the womb), and necropolitics, which is to also say Mbembe's concept of the state of exception ("People-of-Color-Blindness" 33). For Sexton, "it is not *labor* relations, but property relations that are constitutive of slavery" (36). Therefore, it follows that as long as property relations remain inextricably linked to the political economy of anti-blackness, "the libidinal economy of anti-blackness is pervasive" in the postemancipation world (37). This is to say that the application of slave law has actually outlived a "certain form of its prior operations—the property relations specific to the institution of chattel and the plantation-based agrarian economy in which it was sustained" (37).

Using both Hortense Spillers' and Jared Sexton's conception of the black body affected by racialized slavery, what I would argue in this section of the third chapter is that Belicia is actually paradigmatic for Spillers' and Sexton's conceptions of the captive female body as a site of racial formation and sexual subjection. In this section of my third chapter, I will do a reading of the scene in *Oscar Wao* where La Inca finds Belicia in the chicken coop that is her home for those years of her house up until the rescue. I will read Belicia's captivity as "a theft of the body," as Hortense Spillers phrases it in her essay, and Belicia's rescue as a transformation from captive to fugitive ("Mama's Baby" 67). This is to say that the aberrant act, running away

from enslavement, or even the potential to run away that is lodged in the body of the captive, is also the constitutively human thing to do. However, the abject, in being the other, the object of threat and disgust that opposes the “pure” image of the human as inherently white, is also dehumanized during captivity. This means that the fugitive, in running away, still carries the affect of dehumanization.

In the fifth chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, “Poor Abelard: 1944-1946,” Yunior depicts the rising action of the curse of the Cabral family beginning with the story of Belicia’s father Abelard, including the section titled “Fallout” where Belicia’s birth is considered “an ill omen” (*Oscar Wao* 248). In this chapter, the reader is informed of Trujillo’s interest in Abelard’s daughter when he receives an invitation to one of Trujillo’s parties that explicitly demands her appearance. Abelard is disgusted yet fearful of Trujillo’s violent sexual desires manifesting, a fear that is heightened after Abelard made a bad joke to some of Trujillo’s “buddies” as he is opening the trunk of his car and remarks, “I hope there aren’t any bodies here” (*Oscar Wao* 234). While Abelard does his best to avoid the watchful eye of the dictatorship that wants nothing else but to see him pay for his job at Trujillo, the reader knows the fate is sealed.<sup>18</sup> The reader later learns that the year was 1945, and that Abelard was taken hostage by Trujillo’s minions and tortured to death. His wife, Belicia’s mother, dies of what Yunior believes to be postpartum depression—an affect of dispossession—while his other daughters disappear and are believed to be dead. (*Oscar Wao* 211-261)

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<sup>18</sup> Yunior provides that Abelard’s car is a Packard automobile, which he says casts a shadow on Dominican history because “it was the car in which Trujillo had, in his early years, terrorized his first two elections away from the pueblo” (*Oscar Wao* 234).

A decade later, in the year 1955, La Inca hears of the burning of a girl who skipped on work to attend classes at a nearby colegio. In the section named “The Burning,” Yunion adopts the voice of a frantic La Inca when she first encounters Belicia:

Not only had these savages burned the girl, they proceeded to punish her further by locking her in a chicken coop at night! At first they hadn't wanted to bring her out. She can't be your family, she's a prieta. But La Inca insisted, used the Voice on them, and when the girl emerged from the coop, unable to unbend her body because of the burn, La Inca had stared into her wild furious eyes and seen Abelard and Socorro staring back at her. The Third and Final Daughter. Thought lost, now found. (*Oscar Wao* 257)

This passage sets up for the reader a narrative of captivity that can be read alongside the language employed by Spillers and Sexton. I would endeavor to establish first that La Inca, in the passage above, is caught in a defining moment where she must determine, through a politics of skin color, a relationship between the abject and her family. This abjection is made visible through the voices of La Inca's friends who call Belicia “a prieta.” This fact alone determines for them that Belicia is not a member of La Inca's family. Therefore, the absence of her subject position is marked by the abjection of her blackness (“Mama's Baby” 67).

However, it is the burn that assures La Inca that this girl emerging from the chicken coop is actually the daughter of one of her cousins, for it functions as a record of the clusters of racial and sexual violence of anti-blackness that Trujillo unleashed on the Cabral family:

The girl's burns were unbelievably savage. (One hundred and ten hit points minimum.) A monsterglove of festering ruination extending from the back of her neck. A bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha. (*Oscar Wao* 257)

The word “savage” is repeated, here, but this time it has been applied to Belicia’s burns, which have altered her flesh and the orientation of her body. Therefore, her burns reveal the savagery of the kind of violence inflicted on her back, connecting her captive experience to the experiences of captive slave bodies on the plantation. As the burns that cause the accumulation of her flesh weigh down on her back, Belicia becomes a site of ruinous debilitation and dehumanization, her body oriented downward to face the ground that has served as the floor to her domicile. The bomb crater on her back, forever marked by a radiation that spans generations, is a site of the deathly cost of modernization. But at the supposed height of the rapid modernization occurring during the Trujillo regime, an orphan girl in Outer Azua, a Dominican girl “mistaken” for a Haitian, must endure backbreaking labor everyday, caged up in coop each night until her aunt rescues her. This description is of Belicia, but it is frighteningly close to descriptions of real children in the Dominican Republic living and working in such conditions today, in our present moment.

The passage above reveals Belicia’s transformation from captive body to flesh, which is what Spillers would consider to be the shift from human to tool. I would argue that the conditions of captivity applied to Belicia’s blackness are actually compounded on her flesh, itself a material manifestation of the savagery of anti-black racism when sustained and reproduced by racial slavery; this creates the vicious circle of violence that I take to be a formation of “The Circle,” Yuniors term. This is also to say that the ugliness of the reconfigured violence of racial slavery in the form of Belicia’s flesh actually reinforces anti-black racism, since it generates performances of disgust on the part of the oppressor that reify her abjection.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers distinguishes between body and flesh, and provides that this distinction is central to the distinction between captive and liberated subjects (67). I would argue that Belicia’s flesh, as a primary narrative of the “human and social irreparability” of “high crimes against [black] *flesh*,” is actually “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67). And, with Spillers, I would also argue that the “undecipherable markings” of the ruptured skin of Belicia’s *black-black* back actually render “a hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures,” that “come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by color” emerge (67).

However, I would take the phrasing of “undecipherable markings” and place it alongside José Muñoz’s notion of the ephemeral, which, in my reading of Yunior’s archive, constitutes the uncertain traces and glimmers of what remains of the plantation. When La Inca follows, and the reader with her, the movements and orientations of Belicia’s body when she emerges from the chicken coop, La Inca actually recognizes the excess of violence of the Trujillato on Belicia’s ruptured flesh. If we consider the Dominican Republic to be a reformulation of the plantation under Trujillo, as Yunior does in his descriptions of the Plátano Curtain, then Belicia’s flesh, with their “undecipherable markings,” actually reveal the hidden logic of racial slavery, the total affect of collective blackness that she carries in the other language of the archive that coats her back. Thus, Belicia, is the embodiment of this shift in the consciousness of abject Dominican people, where her altered body actually takes flight in her subversion of racial slavery. This is to say that her flesh actually devours

a form of the application of slave law, and then spits it out as a kind of pus. She has become a learned pupil of racial slavery, providing the insurgent ground that begins to take the shape of the Diaspora.

I am reminded of the scene in the novel where Belicia, after having been enrolled in a prestigious private school, is asked to walk over to the board at the front of the classroom. Belicia, who is both “La Prieta Quemada”(the burned black girl) and “La Fea Quemada” (the burned ugly girl), becomes, in a twist of fate, “the Queen of Diaspora” (*Oscar Wao* 261). Taking us years later, however, Yunior performs disdain through his tone when he describes Belicia after the beating that forced her to break up with the Dominican Republic:

Oh, Beli; not so rashly, not so rashly: What did you know about states or diasporas? What did you know about Nueva Yol, or unheated “old law” tenements or children whose self-hate short-circuited their minds? What did you know, madame, about *immigration*? Don’t laugh, my negrita, for your world is about to be changed. Utterly. Yes: a terrible beauty is etc., etc. Take it from me. You laugh because you’ve been ransacked to the limit of your soul, because your lover betrayed you almost unto death, because your first son was neverborn. You laugh because you have no front teeth and you’ve sworn never to smile again. (*Oscar Wao* 160)

This passage is a reiteration of Belicia’s transformation from captive slave to fugitive runaway. This time, she is running away from Trujillo’s Dominican Republic, or shall I say, his plantation. The phrase “‘old law’ tenements” is a conjunction of propriety and Sexton’s statement that it is not labor relations, but property relations that constitute slavery. Yunior’s narration frames Belicia as not knowing about what is to come. However, if we take the Caribbean to be its own, most apt pupil, and the fukú as a reiteration of that myth, then the reader will see that, yes, in the present moment of her lived experience, Belicia is uncertain; however, it is an uncertainty with some

kind of embedded knowledge. In reading Belicia's body as a figure of the fugitive who is also an archive of the historical effects of the plantation, I take the light of the moon to be the knowledge of ephemeral traces and glimmers of the plantation, the polyvalent affect of a violence that reformulates and reconfigures as we have seen with the Trujillato.

Belicia may not know about states or diasporas, however, she embodies the formation of the Diaspora during the span of the Trujillo regime. This embodiment is expanded upon in the novel when Yunior narrates the scene where Belicia is on the plane:

She is sixteen and her skin is the darkness before the black, the plum of the day's last light, her breasts like sunsets trapped beneath her skin, but for all her youth and beauty she has a sour distrusting expression that only dissolves under the weight of immense pleasure. Her dreams are spare, lack the propulsion of a mission, her ambition is without traction. Her fiercest hope? That she will find a man. What she doesn't yet know: the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorias, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her own heart. What else she doesn't know: that the man next to her would end up being her husband and the father of her two children, that after two years together he would leave her, her third and final heartbreak, and she would never love again. (*Oscar Wao* 164)

This is a passage about fertility and pleasure, labor and knowledge. One must note that by the time Belicia is on the plane, she has already lost a child due to a forced miscarriage. Her skin signifies the darkness of nighttime, the blackness of her breasts trapping the rays of sunshine beneath her skin. There is no life in her, not even—a sour and distrusting—milk to nurture the reproduction of life, for her womb is the site of a most profound absence. In other words, and to harken back to Yunior's distrusting tone in the passage I read prior to the scene on the plane, Belicia becomes her missing teeth. She becomes the void as she enters another.

This void, however, is filled with the uncertain residue of her symbolic existence as an embodiment of the aftermath of slavery. In the scene depicted above, Belicia is an embodiment of the totality of the affect produced by the brutal racial and sexual violence she is relegated to in the sugarcane field, which places her experience within the context of the plantation and the racial slavery practiced within and beyond its grounds. On the plane, she is the afterlife of a beating that left her unconscious, broken into fragments of an already abject body. Yet, it is from this form of spectacular abjection that she arises and takes flight. As she flies overseas to the United States, Belicia shatters the Plátano Curtain, which is a reformulation of the myth of the closed circle of the plantation. Therefore, she carries with her, not just the traumas of the past, but also the excess of violence that manifests on the materiality of her flesh, and through the repetition of performances of abjection, actually penetrate the surface of her body and punctures her psyche. From this spot, the continuities of the past spill out into her present, and mark not only her future, but also the futures of those bodies that come out of her.

I read this seemingly contradictory process as Belicia's realization of her impossible subject-position through the act of reflection, which is more an active visitation of the past than it is a simply memory. In this reading, Belicia's laugh and her "immense pleasure" in the passage above mark the internalization of her abjection and blackness. Hence, Belicia's "immense pleasure" and the reorientation of her gaze forward into the future is the grinding of gears that takes place in this process of finding pleasure within pain, of reconciling if not reckoning with her captive state in

order to find some power within her condition. This is the power within her abjection that drives her out, fearlessly, into the Diaspora.

Forced into abandoning a country that has always already abandoned her, she must enter a country that doesn't want or need her, where her absence awaits a reverberating amplification. This amplification, with the Dominican Diaspora as a loudspeaker, is the movement of Belicia's displacement and the collapse of her psyche that has connected her with a historically expansive collective of bodies that have been and remain affected by the African diaspora. The violence of Belicia's scar that is her back moves with her wherever she goes, in flight and ascension, and is a scar that carries a reminder of from the hold of the slave ship, the withholding of her past as she enters another state of exception.

Using the logic as a basis for my argument that frames the passages above that I have chosen and my readings of them, I argue that the performative logic of race within the structures of anti-black racism is revealed in the hieroglyphics of her flesh, which then makes her body a site for the formation of racialized slavery that enable its reconfigurations and reformulations in other spatiotemporal realms, including the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo Era, and the domestic sphere in New Jersey after the great migrations of the Diaspora ("Mama's Baby" 67).

In her flight across the ocean to the United States, Belicia is suspended in air between places, between belongings; her body in flight as the circle of the plantation, the heavy metal of Trujillo's Plátano Curtain, breaks. She ruminates in this breaking of "The Circle," between her existence on the island of the Dominican Republic and her new life, between the violence of one place and that of another. Yet, as she

occupies this gap, her body also functions as a bridge between one state of exception and another, where the excess of violence of racial slavery resides.

### **Domus**

What I aim to show in the rest of this chapter is that the sexual and racial violence of racial slavery post-Diaspora are sustained within the bodies of those individuals who experienced modernity's explosive encounter with the plantation's savage methods of oppression that were put to use by Trujillo during his rule of the Dominican Republic. These bodies that carry with them those structures and systems of creolization, actually transform the spaces from which they have emerged, and with a violent tug backward that causes a kind of whiplash. If the racial and sexual violence of a post-Diasporic world proliferates as it enters those spaces, those properties that are claimed by the migratory subject, then this reconfiguration of the domestic space, I would argue, makes space for the excess of violence in the household of the Diasporic subject. This excess in the domestic sphere makes room for abandonment, which I would also argue, becomes a most desirable form of escapism—as opposed to love, which I would consider impossible for the impossible migratory subject, particularly the Dominican who is also a child of the Trujillato, a signifier of the Dominican Diaspora.

The above is true for many of the characters in the novel as much as it is true for Yuniór's parents in *Drown*. However, in order to make a more conclusive comparison that will hopefully reveal the perpetuation of the kinds of violence experienced by subjects such as the character of Belicia, I will focus my reading of

Yunior's archive more on the movements and orientations of her daughter and granddaughter. In this section, I will argue, through close readings of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and a couple of stories in *Drown*, that the violence of the plantation still persists today, a violence that repeats itself within the context of our contemporary society in various microforms both in Junot Díaz's writing and in the world at large.

In the novel, Lola runs away twice: first to the Jersey shore and then to the Dominican Republic, away from the state of exception and into a contemporary reformulation of Trujillo's plantation; both places are states of exception that still function as reconfigurations of the plantation. Lola's body is also affected by the circle of the plantation to show that we, the Diasporic subjects of the world, can never run away; that for those escaping the modes of subjection of the plantation, the only way out is by revisiting those very modes of subjection that make you an impossible subject of the Diaspora.

I would like to take us to the second passage I chose for beginning of this chapter, which I have also provided below as the end of a block quote.<sup>19</sup> This passage is from the beginning of the second part of the novel, where Lola, the daughter of Belicia, narrates her visit to the Dominican Republic. Lola, who stays with La Inca for fourteen months, must return to the United States at her mother Belicia's request. However, she doesn't want to. The first thing Belicia says to Lola when she returns to

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<sup>19</sup> Lola narrates, "But if these years have taught me anything, it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in," (*Oscar Wao* 209).

the Dominican Republic to bring Lola back to the United States is “Coño pero tú sí eres fea,” which literally translates to “Cunt, but you really are ugly” (*Oscar Wao* 208). “You always think with your parents that at least at the very end something will change, something will get better,” narrates Lola, but “not for us” (*Oscar Wao* 208).

Imagining a different scenario, Lola narrates:

I probably would have run. I would have waited until we got back to the States, waited like paja de arroz, burning slow, slow, until they dropped their guard and then one morning I would have disappeared. Like my father disappeared on my mother and was never seen again. Disappeared like everything disappears. Without a trace. I would have lived far away. I would have been happy, I’m sure of it, and I would never have had children. I would let myself grow dark in the sun, no more hiding from it, let my hair indulge in all its kinks, and she would have passed me on the street and never recognized me. That was the dream I had. But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. (*Oscar Wao* 208-9)

Lola, like her mother Belicia, is dark. However, the difference between Lola’s blackness and Belicia’s is that Lola, unlike Belicia who does so in a less visibly subversive manner, defiantly displays the roots of her abjection. Yet, within this difference resides a congruity in the forms in which these subjects respond to such abjection. I would argue that Lola runs away because she feels abandoned by her mother who calls her ugly multiple times over the course of the novel. In other words, both characters abandon each other as a means of flight within a specific reformulation of a contemporary representation of creolization, which I take to be translated into the domestic sphere, and into the family structure within the context of normative Dominican culture.

The phrase “without a trace” speaks to the ephemeral traces of the landscape of the plantation that are read on the surface of Belicia’s body, the excess of racial

slavery and anti-black racism. These are forms of violence, I would argue, that transcend generations of families even after the Diaspora. Distressed, Lola imagines a different scenario where she takes flight, where she disappears “without a trace.” However, we are reminded of Belicia on the plane after her spectacular abjection and the excess of violence that gets carried over, and even emerges both in the domestic sphere and on the page in the archive. And through this doing of memory, we are reminded also of the inescapability of the excess of such racial and sexual violence that the Black abject remains particularly susceptible to in a society that remains also, but remains infected with anti-black racism. Thus, a connection is drawn between Belicia’s experience of abjection and Lola’s, as both perform escape in a similar form of abandonment as a result. This insight furthers my argument that the violence of the plantation repeats in various spatiotemporal realms throughout history, and presently, for the characters in the novel, through a microform of escape in the grander context of the history of racial slavery through abandonment.

As we have ended on the theme of abandonment, I would like to note as well that Rafael de la Casas, Yuniór’s father in *Drown*, as a victim of abandonment, is also a perpetrator of this particular form of escape. He cheats on his wife, abandons his family, especially Yuniór, the more pato of his two sons. Thus, like Belicia who is a part of his generation of Dominican subjects of the Diaspora, Rafael in “Negocios” remains cursed by the impossibility of his subject-position as a migratory, minoritarian subject after the Diaspora. I would argue that Rafa’s curse is also translated in the domestic sphere and settles in Yuniór, who spends a major part of his life counteracting this personal fukú by writing an archive as zafa, the counter-spell of

the fukú, not just for the Cabral family as we see in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, but also for his family in *Drown* (Oscar Wao 7).

For what remains of this chapter, I will read the body of Belicia's daughter, Isis, to provide a description of how zafa functions based on my discussion of her relations to Yunior and the basement in Chapter 2. In the final section of the novel, Yunior enters Isis into the archive as though she has emerged onto a stage and a spotlight has illuminated all matters of her appearance. "Behold the girl: the beautiful muchachita: Lola's daughter," narrates Yunior. What is particularly curious, however, is what is around Isis' neck, which disrupts the happiness of her appearance:

But on a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barrier shields against the Eye. Backed by a six-mile plinth prayer. (Lola's not stupid; she made both my mother and La Inca the girl's madrinás.) Powerful wards indeed. (*Oscar Wao* 330)

Lola has dressed Isis, the calm of the hurricane of the Cabral family's fukú, with a series of pendants and medallions, all of which belonged to other members of the Cabral clan. Isis's torso is covered with the residual affect of the circle of the plantation that has taken shape as protective jewelry. I am reminded of Nao Bustamante's rings of tape. Through this act of wearing, of holding (close to her chest) these objects that represent violence, Isis fights against the evils of the world that have cursed her family for generations. As we learn through Yunior's imagined encounter with Isis, it is Isis's job to continue the production of this zafa in order to assuage the evil force of the fukú, which functions somewhat as a deity who needs to be feed through bloody sacrifice.

Thinking with Isis (as well as Belicia, Lola, Rafa and Yuniór), I argue that even as we protect ourselves from such brutal realities, we will never escape the truth of our collective past. Yuniór, like Isis, protects himself from the kind of harm his father enacts, but also perpetuates the violence that makes the structure of his family a harmful structure of feeling. Yuniór's performative composition of the archive functions as a counter-spell to the fukú, an antidote to the disease of anti-blackness and anti-queerness: as zafa. It follows, then, that for Yuniór, the only way out is in. This is to say that the only way out of the curse is through a poetics of memory in the form of an alternative archive that remembers the landscape of the plantation and the bodies that carried the ruination of its structures and systems—the embodied ruined nations of Diaspora. Thus, the notion that the only way out is in plunges Yuniór and the reader into the sea of violence of anti-black racism and racial slavery that have cursed the New World since the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the European colonization of the Americas.

However, the turn backward and plunge inward required of an archive about the history of colonization, creolization and enslavement in a Caribbean country such as the Dominican Republic is one made with an awareness of how deep and expansive this sea of violence actually is; it is a mode of self-reflection, but even more, it is a method of preservation. In acting out these reparations of the self, the body holds a hope of a necessary regeneration. Isis, Lola's daughter, is an embodiment of this rebirth. She is the ultimate evidence that the seemingly closed circle of the plantation, no matter how impenetrable it is claimed to be, will always remain porous—that the curse of the Caribbean will continue to carry on:

One day, though, the Circle will fail.  
As Circles always do.  
And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*. (*Oscar Wao* 330)

Too bad, as Lola lets the reader know in her narration at the beginning of the second part of the novel, a member of the Cabral family has never escaped the *fukú*. “You can never run away,” she says, “Not ever” (*Oscar Wao* 209). In the section titled “The Dark Age” of the sixth chapter of the novel, “Land of the Lost: 1992-1995,” Yunior reminds us that some things, “like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate,” “never change” (*Oscar Wao* 264).

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### III

## *Brief Wondrous Life:* Writing Violence in the Break

*I'll pour her a drink, and the wife will fry up her special pastelitos; I'll ask her about her mother as lightly as I can, and I'll bring out the pictures of the three of us from back in the day, and when it starts getting late I'll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her brother's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything.*

*A light, a desk, a cot—I've prepared it all.*

*How many nights will she stay with us?*

*As many as it takes.*

*And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream.*

— Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*<sup>20</sup>

In Chapter 2, I trace the reconfigurations of racial slavery by following the movements of Belicia Cabral, her daughter Lola and granddaughter, Isis. What I find in this demonstration of the distribution of the affect of creolization as it has been localized within the body of Dominican during and after the Trujillato is that the plantation follows that body wherever it goes. It is a seemingly eternal curse, a fukú that preys on those black bodies that are thrown back into the plane of the expansive sea through which the belly of the ship sailed. I find by the end of the previous chapter that the self-preservation of Isis, the symbolic embodiment of the potential for zafa, through the right combination of emotions and protection, may become what breaks the chain of the circle of violence that has plagued the New World since the European colonization of the Americas.

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<sup>20</sup> This passage is from the novel's postface (*Oscar Wao* 330-1)

In this chapter, I will provide a pessimist reading of the novel that serves to locate a power within the abjection of the minoritarian subject, which I read as a subject who is excluded from the majority, and is therefore abject. Yuniór, in grieving for Oscar and in struggling to combat the fukú, as well as the racism that is pervasive in his culture, occupies this depressive domain. In her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Heather Love urges us to read texts negatively by considering their backward feelings—shame, depression and regret—in order to provide a conceivable future that sustains a queer subject’s survival in the present (*Feeling* 8). It is through this mode of reading that depression serves as a reminder of trauma and misfittedness, a way of feeling backward in the direction of the past.<sup>21</sup> If, for Ann Cvetkovich in the introduction to *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), depression is the feeling of being stuck, then the opposite would be a creative mobility or world-making project. I locate a power in a depression that has been recognized as such. I also locate such creative mobility queer world-making in Yuniór’s composition of the archive, which in the context of the basement becomes a performance of the language of abjection and queerness.

As I’ve discussed in some detail in my introduction, José Muñoz’s “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” (2006) responds to depression becoming a dominant affective position addressed within the cultural field of contemporary global capitalism. This

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<sup>21</sup> I would argue that Yuniór’s misfittedness is represented by the basement where he writes the archive, which is a kind of reiteration of the basement in *Drown* where his best friend Beto performs fellatio on him. Therefore, the misfittedness of Yuniór’s queerness is what registers his fear of being a homosexual as a mode of depression. I am reminded, as well, of Belicia during the beating where her hate toward men produce in her a rage so strong that it keeps her alive, even though she has been oppressed into a depression that has become inseparable from her blackness (*Oscar Wao* 146). I think also of the weight of depression on the black body, which accumulates for those predisposed to the affect of anti-black racism.

depression, for Muñoz, is not one single depression, however, but an affective site that is "a feeling of brownness that transmits and is structured through a depressive stance, a kind of feeling down" ("Feeling Brown" 676). I am reminded of Yuniors archive-as-performance, where the ephemeral landscape of the plantation is what remains, transforming the ruptured flesh of the slave into an archive of ruins and residual affect.

In "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," Muñoz draws from certain aspects of Kleinian object-relations theory, emphasizing a particular mode of depression instead of generalizing it. In describing the depressive position, Muñoz places it in relation to what he calls "brown feeling," which "chronicles a certain ethics of the self that is utilized and deployed by people of color and other minoritarian subjects who don't feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment" ("Feeling Brown" 676). In doing so, he hopes to enable the imagination of positions or narratives of being and becoming that can resist the gravitational pull of identitarian models of relationality. Such is how I read Yuniors archive, as spatiotemporally distant, but affectively close to the body who feels brown.<sup>22</sup>

By connecting to theories of development, Muñoz also identifies the radical impulse that motivates the minoritarian subject to find a place for belonging and shows how race is a political doing. This political doing that race performs is the "effects that the recognition of racial belonging, coherence, and divergence present in the world" ("Feeling Brown" 679). Therefore, Yuniors archive, I would argue, is a

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<sup>22</sup> Muñoz sees affect as a way of resisting this pull, as being "descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subaltern speak and are heard or, more importantly, are felt" ("Feeling Brown" 677).

political doing, as well, and one where Yuniór identifies with the subjects he writes into it.

Furthermore, to look at race as performative, as something that can be accessed by its effects, is to destabilize the political and conceptual impasses that have dominated racial discourse (“Feeling Brown” 679). Additionally, Muñoz adds that brownness is a mode of attentiveness to the self for others that is aware of the ways in which it is not and can never be whiteness (“Feeling Brown” 680). The depressive position that is to feel brown, therefore, is not a linear development closure, but a position we live in that describes the ways in which we attempt to enter psychic reality. The attentiveness to others I stated earlier is to see the other-in-alterity as existing in relation to the self. Muñoz goes on to show how love can be a striving for belonging that does not ignore the various obstacles that the subject must overcome to achieve this belonging.

The cruel optimism of Muñoz’ conception of love is especially important to consider when thinking about Belicia’s depressive position in the Diaspora. Sources of sadness and depression are constantly presented and perceived as primitive conditions that need to be contained. In other words, for Belicia, which is to say also the Creole slave, a depressive mode of being is inhabitable. I locate a profoundly queer essence in the uncertainty of the evidence of her ontology as the slave inhabits this depressive position.

With respect to Yuniór, however, queerness directly links up with love in the story “Drown,” where he develops a love for Beto. Therefore, Yuniór and Belicia, both embodiments of the ephemeral landscape of the plantation, which is to say

affected individuals of the historical reconfigurations of the plantation, are sites of queerness because of the amount of repression they contain and the various ways in which they contain them.

### **Basement as Archive**

I will regard Junot Díaz's writing in *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as poetry in the form of an alternative archive, or, to invoke Derek Walcott, as fragmented epic memory that Yunior has written down in his basement. In his Nobel Prize speech "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," collected in his book *What The Twilight Says: Essays* (1998), Walcott discusses his creative process of writing poetry and the fragments of land from which he gains his inspiration: the Antilles. In it, he writes with deep concern about how the Caribbean, in the 1990s, was still perceived as illegitimate, rootless, with fragments and echoes of real people—some, like Froude, who he quotes, would say no people at all.

According to Walcott, the process of writing poetry is the remaking of an already fragmented memory, "a memory that yearns to join the center, a limb remembering the body from which it was severed" (*Twilight* 69). I would like to take us to a passage from Walcott's essay that should illuminate our understanding of language in a poetics of memory, such as the kind Yunior constructs, and therefore perform through composition:

Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. (*Twilight* 69)

This draws out what Walcott means by fragmented epic memory, where the so-called buried language of the Caribbean is a starting point but not a resting point for self-discovery. I would go even further. If memory is the past, then poetry, as it combines the past and the present, the real with the fictional in its remaking of that fragmented memory, actually imagines a new future as fresh as the raindrops Walcott writes onto the brow of the statue in the passage above.

Therefore, Yuniór's archive is a conjugation of past, present, and future, a contemporary literary imagining of Caribbean, and particularly Dominican history, that spans an entire history of colonization and creolization. It is a remaking of the history of the region's modernization, from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a conjuring up of a memory that can be read on the statue of Belicia's character. Yuniór's archive, like Antillean poetry, represents the remaking of an already fragmented memory. It is a story of one particular character, Hypatía Belicia Cabral, who is beaten and fragmented on the page, whose characterizations breathe with the horrid life of the language of abjection as she becomes nothing more on the page but a list of broken body parts and ruptured flesh in a sugarcane field.

In the passage I chose as the start of this chapter, Yuniór has imagined a future scenario with Isis, Lola's daughter. As opposed to "the wife," who in her anonymity performs the role of dutiful housewife as she cooks and serves "pastelitos," Yuniór has hopes for Isis, whom he admires (*Oscar Wao* 330).<sup>23</sup> If she's as smart and as brave as he expects, Yuniór believes Isis will be the one to end the fukú that has

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<sup>23</sup> I am reminded of the scene in "Ysrael" of *Drown* where Yuniór lowers himself into his seat on the autobus, and the pastelito he paid for with his uncle's money puts a stain on his pants. In that same scene, a stranger rubs at the stain, which was located in the crotch area. Yuniór calls the man a "pato," which means faggot in Spanish (*Drown* 12).

cursed the Cabral family for generations. Performing both “deranged uncle” and “frantic writer,” Yuniór describes his basement and the contents within its walls as if he were running out of time, which is particularly ironic considering the alteration of time he has caused with the conjugation of past, present and future in his composition. Schizophrenically, Yuniór moves from listing the materials in the Cabral family records to describing the exteriors of all four of his refrigerators, which he describes as “the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything” (*Oscar Wao* 330). In other words, Yuniór begins his list in the middle paragraph, but ends, and therefore places emphasis on, that which is protecting the records from damage, from disappearance, from becoming Froude’s perception of the Caribbean: rootless, illegitimate and filled with no people at all. Thus, Yuniór’s archive has become the fragmented epic memory Walcott discusses and Rowan Ricardo Phillips recalls, the process of creative imagining beginning again and again with the utterance of each phrase in the alternative archive as the poetics of a Dominican writer’s legerdemain writes the bodies of the past into existence before they are forgotten.

“I’ve prepared it all,” writes Yuniór, referring to the light, desk and cot that have already been placed where Isis, Lola’s daughter, would find them. The passage goes from “I will” in the first paragraph to “I have” in the sentence after, marking a shift in verb tense from the future simple to the present perfect tense. During this temporal transgression, the reader is pulled back to the present after having read, and therefore imagined as Yuniór intends, a hypothetical scenario between Yuniór and Isis. But one is not simply placed back within the present moment of readership, but

also simultaneously thrust even further backward into Yuniors moment of composition. Therefore, both the text and the reader, in reading a portion of the text, occupy multiple temporal realms where the past, present and future have been combined to create an archive that disrupts the continuity of a more normative archive that satisfies the structure of a standardized historicizing project. Indeed, by writing "I've prepared it all," Yuniors does not only refer to the bedroom set-up he has put together in the basement of his home for Isis, but also to the preparation of the archive he has already produced, the one about a family curse and the death of his best friend Oscar.

I would argue that the archive Yuniors constructs is a historicizing project that aims to document the historical emotions of reconfigurations of racial slavery; namely, the affect of abjection, a kind of preservation of feeling in alterity, and the violence it reproduces. It is also an archive that aims to recover the missing evidence of the insurgent captive female. Before the deaths of her immediate family members, Belicia, Abelard's third and final daughter, is born not just black, but "*black-black—kongo-black, shango-black, kali-black, zapote-black, rekha-black—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact,*" writes Yuniors. He continues, "That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen" (*Oscar Wao* 248). In fact, it could be said that Belicia's dark complexion actually causes her mother's postpartum depression, a severe "loss" that made her step in front of a speeding ammunition truck. In other words, the archive has become a political doing that constitutes resistance against an imposed blackness, an antidote to the curse of anti-black racism in a land that continues to be

marked by the ruins of the plantation. It can be said then that Yunior's intentions in writing the archive of the Cabral family are to not only break the Cabral family's curse, but to also expose how racial discrimination is as pervasive in Dominican culture at the time of his writing the archive as it was during and after the colonization and creolization of that particular region of the Caribbean. Therefore the space of the basement in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I would argue, is the site of the formation of an archive that is about blackness as abjection.

Another basement makes an appearance in *Drown*. While Yunior's basement later in life is the site of a particular reconstruction of blackness, the basement in which he and Beto engage sexually, presumably in the form of fellatio, becomes a site of queerness. He returns to this basement frequently after engaging in homosexual intercourse. "Mostly I stayed in the basement, terrified that I would end up abnormal, a fucking pato," writes Yunior, "but he was my best friend and back then that mattered to me more than anything" (*Oscar Wao* 104). This passage is where queer sexual practices might be used, to quote from the introduction to Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), "to create a vertiginous doubly queer register that matches, reflects, and helps constitute the well-known double-consciousness of blackness" (*Extravagant* 8). Yunior himself experiences abjection as a depressed minoritarian subject that actually represses his queer, brown, black, and Caribbean feelings way down, deep into the underground of the basement. In both representations of the basement, there is an internalized self-loathing, which has much to do with the symbiotic relationship between queerness-as-abjection and blackness-as-abjection. There, in the basement, this complex combination of affect

and abjection generate a structure of feeling brown, black, queer, and ultimately, abject.

Abjection plays out in both spaces in the form of the archive, where Yunior's hesitation with abjection on the page is derived from a desire to write the abject into existence. This performed abjection is generated by an internal conflict with queerness that constitutes him as much as it informs his construction of Belicia as a container of queer, "uncertain" feeling. As I trace Belicia throughout the novel, I read for the properties of embodied alienation that make her abject and contribute to this uncertain queerness.<sup>24</sup> Thus, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an archive of abjection. I would argue that Yunior performs abjection on the page as a means of hesitating with and exposing the very bones of abjection that depress him and oppress Belicia.

### **Abjection**

This section aims to explore the modes of abjection depicted in Yunior's archive. The drive to the untamed, undomesticated, rural landscape of the cane field represents Belicia's alienation from society (*Oscar Wao* 146). As symbolized by Belicia's captive body inside of the car of her captors, the black body in the archive moves as it becomes abject, mirroring the movement exemplified by Judith Butler's theory in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) where the call to

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<sup>24</sup> In the section titled "Thinking Black Abjection" of his introduction, Scott comments on his "Sethe-like" choice to make *what* makes these subjects *black* the vantage point from which he chooses to view the power within subjugation. It is an impossible position that is determined by his "inescapable relation to the history of racialized slavery and racial segregation in the Americas. That history and the relation to it of those of us who hold (or are forced to hold) it as a legacy, and those of us who live in and as black bodies, allows us to perceive somewhat more clearly the properties of embodied alienation than those who are unconscious of that legacy and/or living in racially unmarked or "white" bodies" (*Extravagant* 13).

subjectivity is understood as a call to subjection and subjugation. In the chapter “Between Freud and Foucault,” Butler uses Foucault’s biopolitics to show how the body is invested with psychic meaning. Butler suggests that if the subject is never the same to the psyche from which it emerges—and for Foucault the subject is not the same as the body from which it emerges—then the body works as a substitute for the psyche. She then locates a possibility of resistance on the body which experiences a temporal gap between the imaginary as expressed through the body and the present condition of the subject. “The body is not a site on which a construction takes place; it is a destruction on the occasion of which a subject is formed,” states Butler (*Psychic Life* 92). Therefore, the violent oppressive modes of subjection and subjugation that Belicia is conditioned to endure acquire a penetrative force that impresses not only her body, but her psyche, as well, becoming a part of what Judith Butler refers to as “psychic excess.”

In other words, and to relate this to *Oscar Wao*, the body in the archive moves as it becomes abject, and mirrors the kind of movement exemplified by Butler’s theories on subjectivity, where the methods of subjectivization are revealed in order for the subject to become intelligible as abject in a normative society, even as the subject is destroyed and made invisible. Butler has very little to say about the slave narrative, however I use her theory to perhaps shed insight on the novel’s invocation of the slave narrative. In this spirit, Belicia is a site of abjection that makes her a politically subordinated subject with no legal grounding to legitimize her existence.

Throughout the novel, Belicia is consistently hailed as the subordinate other and interpellated often through violent means as the threatening object of resistance

that needs punishment and regulation. Yuniór narrates to this effect when he introduces Belicia's hometown of Baní, which Yuniór describes as "A city famed for its resistance to blackness" (*Oscar Wao* 78). Only by inhabiting this other subject position is Belicia recognized by society, creating a disjunction between her self and the outside world of normative society that causes her loneliness. To better understand this loneliness, let us return to the beginning of the third chapter:

Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola like a dream, or the trumpets from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral:  
a girl so tall your leg bones ached just looking at her  
so dark it was as if the Creatrix had, in her making, blinked  
who, like her yet-to-be-born-daughter, would come to exhibit a  
particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere.  
(*Oscar Wao* 77)

Here, with the capitalized "Island," Díaz goes back in time, before the Diaspora, before the dictatorships of the Dominican Republic and into the world of the Plantation, of slaves and masters, where the unattainability *of* and the undying yearning *for* freedom make up for an insatiable desire to be anywhere else. This desire takes the form of Belicia Cabral who is an embodiment of this restlessness, a relentless want to be somewhere else that Yuniór describes as "the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere" (77). Indeed, "Island of our eviction," speaks to her exclusion from society, her alienation as she becomes abnormal, belonging to another world: the underground such as Yuniór's basement. The word "eviction" is an allusion to the expulsion of Dominicans during the Diaspora, who saw flight as the only means of breaking free from captivity and the plantation, reformulated during the Trujillato. This linguistic attachment to movement, which is also stasis on the page, is a representation of her impossible condition, her abject state.

Belicia on the drive to the sugarcane field begins to embody this abjection, so much so that her blackness becomes the source for public displays of disgust. This is to say that because of her complexion, Belicia is disgusting to the state and to the state's subjects, her body oriented and moved by the mechanics of abjection that remain legitimate, operable and certainly applicable in society. To further understand the mechanics of subordination, it is key to digest, as a reader of the novel, that Belicia's darkness and resemblance to a slave is perceived as an invitation for public remarks of disgust. Thus, her subjectivization exceeds the surface of her appearance so that her body is treated as a slave by society, a society that sees her body as the embodiment of blackness, of resistance. The space that emerges in the wake of this disjunction between normative society and the abject self—the space I referred to earlier in this chapter that determines a subject's psychic excess— allows for a performativity of disgust as seen through the character of Wei, whose comment that reifies Belicia's abjection.

In the passage above, Belicia, since the years of her coming-of-age, is depicted as being extremely tall, “so tall” that it makes your own leg bones ache simply by looking at her, as if she were taken one day and stretched vertically. She is also “so dark,” which illuminates Baní's aversion to blackness that Yunion refers to. “You black,” says Wei, one of Belicia's Asian peers at school, “*Black-black*” (84). Belicia is subordinated by Wei who is herself a member of a minoritarian group. In the chapter “The Performativity of Disgust” from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed explores what abjection does to the body of the source of disgust who is made abject in specific instances (she refers to them as performances) of

disgust (*Emotion* 82). In her book, Ahmed shows how emotions are named in speech acts. So, when Wei calls Belicia “*black-black*,” she defines Belicia’s blackness as an emotion, equating her body with feeling. However, it is a feeling of disgust that stems from Belicia’s opposition to the object of the ideal racial category, which is blackness. Thereupon, disgust acts as the vehicle through which the body becomes a repository of feeling, or rather, abjection.

According to Ahmed, disgust involves the “‘weightiness’ of feelings, the way in which feelings are, in some sense, material; like objects, feelings do things, and they affect what they come into contact with. So feeling ‘disgusted’ is not simply an inner or psychic state; it works on bodies, by transforming or ‘working on’ the surfaces of bodies” (*Emotion* 85). The exchange between Wei and Belicia works as an excellent example of the performativity of disgust for it satisfies the guidelines outlined in Ahmed’s essay. “But even Wei had some choice words for Beli,” narrates Yuniior, “You black, she said, fingering Belicia’s thin forearm. *Black-black*” (*Oscar Wao* 84). The italicization and repetition of black works to emphasize the disgust with which Wei utters those words, but it is the touch on the forearm that places this scene within the framework of the performativity of disgust. Thus, the violence of the performativity of disgust as well as the brutal violence that often comes after it do not only reside in the psychic excess that burdens the lived experience of the abject self, but materialize on the body.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Showing how disgust works on the body, Ahmed writes:

Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. That contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity: it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of ‘being offensive’, but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive. The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted. As a result, while disgust *over takes* the body, it also *takes over* the object

Later in her essay, Ahmed describes how the intensity of disgust prompts the movement toward the exotified object, yet the proximity to the source of disgust also prompts a movement backward that centers the exotified object of disgust in the center of the spectators' gaze. By considering the spaciality of disgust relations, one may see that the distance between Belicia and Wei reveals a power relation that undermines the Belicia as the object that opposes and threatens white supremacy, lowering it to the position of subordinated subject (*Emotion* 87-8).

As a result, "disgust at 'that which is below' functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, *through which 'aboveness' and 'belowness' become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces'*" (*Emotion* 89). Thus, Belicia's body as the object of disgust becomes definable by her 'belowness' and 'beneathness,' "embodying that which is lower than human or civil life" (*Emotion* 97). It should be noted that Belicia, in this reading of embodiment, isn't defined by what's below or what's beneath, but the belowness and beneathness of the particular process of subordination she is subject to. In other words, to say that Belicia is blackness in the archive is to say that she is abjection in the archive. The forms of Belicia's abjection in the archive are as spectacular as her blackness in the eyes of the oppressor, who locates a spectularity in her horrid blackness; this is a spectularity of abjection that is met with a most spectacular violence, one that links the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato with the plantation societies of the Caribbean during the extensive colonization and creolization of The Greater Antilles.

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that apparently gives rise to it. The body is overtaken precisely insofar as it takes the object over, in a temporary holding onto the detail of the surface of the object: its texture, its shape and form, how it clings and moves. It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so offensive that it sickens and over takes the body. (*Emotion* 85)

In Muñoz's essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," the ephemeral is linked to textuality and narrativity like memory that is interested in "traces, glimmers, residues and specks of things" (10). When applied to the landscape of the plantation, this ephemerality constitutes the poetics of what remains, an archive of historical emotions and feelings, which, in the novel, is embodied by Belicia. Reading with Elizabeth Freeman's essay "Packing History. Count(er)ing Generations" (2000), the shift from Yunió's description of the plantation to spectacular scenes of violence is a shift from a non-narrative, almost futuristic (and therefore utopic) model of "iteration" to a narrative, historicist model of allegorization, in which the "material by-products of past failures" become the bodies that "write the poetry of a different future" (732). One could say then that Yunió is a melancholic narrator, whose allegorization of bodies is the form of a collective, yet inward grieving for the lost object. Yunió's melancholia involves not only grieving, but also preserving the lost object, which in the case of *Oscar Wao*, is Belicia's body that has been repossessed to become an object under white supremacy, along with her subjectivity that is beaten out of her.

Since allegory works through collective held meanings and experiences, it very well may be that Yunió's focus on Belicia's body implies less a preservation to work through his grief for the symbolic loss of his mother, and more a remaking of the world as a narrative "cure" to its gruesome realities. It could even be said, as Elizabeth Freeman writes in her critique of Butler's reference to allegory in her writing, that Yunió produces an archive as a complexly allegorical project in order to construct and circulate something like an embodied temporal map, a political archive

for a contingent form of personhood (734). But while this portrayal of Belicia's body within the archive pulls the narrator and the reader closer to her past, the project of producing a body that functions as a temporal map and a political archive reveals a kind of temporal drag where the past acquires a gravitational pull even as it is inserted in the present, and even as this present (both at the moment of composition and consumption) imagines a future.

This reading of Yunior's narration suggests a queer performativity within his use of time that is, to reiterate Freeman's words, "basically progressive, insofar as it depends upon repetitions with a difference—iterations that are transformative and future-oriented" (728). Yunior's depiction of Belicia forces us, in futurist fashion, to reimagine our historical categories, to rethink our own position in relation to the "pre-historical," which I take to be that which has yet to be archived in an allegorical historicizing project. The function of the archive then is to illuminate these moments of rupture where the past and the future combine to make a present that is always partially determined by something else, not just that body in that particular moment in history, but the history that precedes that body and the future that is generated after that body's lived experience in the world has ended.

Yunior's "improper" attachment to Belicia suggests how contemporary sexual and gendered publics, in refusing to mourn "properly" and instead preserving melancholic identifications or insertions of Black radical subjectivities, might propel us to a barely-imagined future (743). This barely suggests, for a reader of queerness, a cruel optimism, to invoke Lauren Berlant, where Yunior's grief for the lost object, which is also a desire for a love-object insofar as Belicia represents the loss of his

own mother, also presents an obstacle to his freedom (from grief and mourning). This relationship suggests that “the tug backward” is always a part of the movement forward insofar as it is a potentially transformative part of movement itself.

Instead of queerness (and ephemerality) deriving from the traces and glimmers that remain from the performance of the archive, I propose a more uncomfortable approach: applying queer thought to theories of black corporeality (the Black body and its abject state) in order to remain in the undeniability of Belicia’s ruptured flesh being a violent act of anti-blackness, a material conditioning of Belicia’s body as the primary site of the violence of racial slavery. This is a queerness that reveals the most violent of realities that even their extravagant extraction and abstraction from our collective consciousness, manage to remain hidden under the cloak of the dominant histories and discourses that capture us.

Unique to this archive are its depictions of the spectacle, particularly those moments of crippling subjection where the black body becomes the site of a most primal violence, the kind that were repeatedly enacted on plantations across the Western hemisphere during and after the Atlantic slave trade. Through a reading of affect, emotion and feeling, Belicia’s racialized and sexualized black body becomes queer, and provides a queerness that has experienced mutilations, lacerations and ruptures. In other words, a queer reading of the novel, as both the ephemeral remains of bodies marked for death and a world-making project, reveals that Yunion actually returns to the “hard” empirical, and almost scientific—to invoke C.L.R. James—evidence of Belicia’s broken body parts and ruptured flesh, its movements,

orientations, alterations and mutilations. What this results in is an archive of the violence of abjection. Further, to write abjection into the archive is to write violently.

### **Buried Spectacle**

If we consider the affect of the many forms of violence of racial slavery as having the ability to alter and flatten the physicality of the black body, as well as other material “objects,” and that these bodies are materially conditioned into reinforcing those modes of abjection, then I would argue that there is a materiality within the ephemeral violence of the plantation on the page. This, I argue, Yuniors mimics in his representations of scenes of spectacular violence that return to the grounds that buried those historical emotions he aims to recover.

To render the effect of turning back in time, and as I described in Chapter 1, Yuniors depicts the drive to the sugarcane field as “some real-time machine-type shit,” one second “deep in the twentieth century (well, the twentieth century of the Third World)” and the other “plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane.” This is a “transition between states,” and shows the simultaneity of the modern state and the plantation state. But just like that, over the span of one sentence, Yuniors moves from a depiction of the beautiful landscape of a rural Caribbean region to the pulverizing beating of Belicia’s body:

They’d been punching her and her right eye had puffed into a malignant slit, her left breast so preposterously swollen that it looked like it would burst, her lip was split and something was wrong with her jaw, she couldn’t swallow without causing herself excruciating shocks of pain. She cried out each time they struck her but she did not cry, entiendes? (*Oscar Wao* 146)

All of this violence happens in transit, starting in the twentieth century and ending in the late eighteenth century. “Malignant slit,” “swollen,” “burst,” “split,” “shocks,” “pain.” This passage, from the chapter “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral: 1955-1962,” describes in harsh detail the impressions of violence done to the body of a pregnant Belicia, who is repeatedly punched by Trujillo’s minions before arriving at a sugarcane field. With every blow, she covers her stomach with her knees, whispering “You’ll be OK” and “You’ll live” to the fetus she will later end up losing after the deathly beating of a lifetime (146). This passage visualizes the movement of the abject body on its way to nothingness.

“They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog,” narrates Yunió, conjuring and commentating on an entire history of slavery in the span of two short sentences (*Oscar Wao* 147). This scene of spectacular violence is a representation of the structural and physical violence that controls, contains and ultimately destroys the body of the slave. By comparing the scene of Belicia’s beating with the beatings of slaves on plantations all over the New World, Yunió links the violence of Dominican dictatorial regimes with the violence of the plantation, revealing continuity between the two systems of oppression.

The violence of the plantation here repeats itself in the encounter between Belicia and Trujillo’s executioners on the sugarcane field. What is revealed then is a form of violence that manifests into similar forms of punishment and regulation in both the plantation and the Trujillato, a violence that transcends time and is perpetuated from generation to generation. Appropriately, as the novel is insurgent in the way it counters History (with a capital H), the point of convergence at which both

oppressive machines meet is none other than the captive female, which both oppressive, misogynist structures of power punish and regulate with racial and sexual violation to barbaric extremes. Yet, Yuniór restrains from fully depicting the spectacle of violence.

When Yuniór asks “entiendes?” at the end, he takes up the role of one of Trujillo’s minions in order to place the reader in the position of Belicia as she expels cries of pure agony. What is revealed to the reader as he is interpellated is that he cannot speak to respond to narrator’s question, experiencing a simulation of the silence forced onto Belicia. This silence speaks to the silence Belicia is subject to when written into the alternative archive Yuniór has endeavored to construct: a silencing of her voice, and thus the silencing of her existence as she becomes nothing more than a list of bruised body parts on the verge of rupture. Yuniór decides to omit the details that describe the acts of violence of her beating in the cane field as they were enacted on Belicia’s flesh, either to spare the reader the gory details, or, more plausibly, to provide a space for the unaccounted screams that were prompted by every punch.

The slave’s ontology as characterized in the figure of Belicia is based on uncertain evidence, on proof that cannot be proven for it does not exist in History. Saidiya Hartman, author of the essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), provides a methodology for appropriately inserting violence against non-persons into a historical archive (“Venus” 11). Key to constructing a narrative that is based on archival research as is presumably Yuniór’s process of writing the story of the Cabral family, one must, to use Hartman’s words, exploit the capacities of the subjunctive, “a

grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities” (“Venus” 11). These kinds of stories tell an impossible story while amplifying the impossibility of its telling. Yuniors does this when he writes, “her left breast so preposterously swollen that it looked like it would burst” (*Oscar Wao* 146).

Referring to her intention in writing *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Route* (2007), Hartman writes, “This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (“Venus” 11). The method behind this process of narration is what Hartman refers to as “critical fabulation,” which involves “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view.” Therefore, Yuniors, in writing “her left breast so preposterously swollen that it looked like it would burst” (to emphasize the use of the subjunctive), has attempted, as Hartman does, to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (“Venus” 11).

After a paragraph and a brief dialogue, Yuniors states that he would rather not describe the individual acts of brutal violence done against Belicia. Yuniors experiences a moment of narrative restraint where he delays his impulse to archive the spectacular event for it would recover, instead of Belicia’s lived experience that has been flattened out, the violence of abjection. Narrative restraint is discussed extensively in Saidiya Hartman’s essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008). A scholar in African-American literature and history, Hartman’s contributions to the

understanding of slavery and historical archiving provide insight into not only our understanding of Díaz's novel but also the use of narrative in historical archives in general. In her essay, Hartman seeks not to mime the violence of the spectacular event by employing a particular handling of language and narrative that serves to redress that violence instead. She attempted to do so in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Route*. However, due to the Venus' brief appearance in the archive as a dead girl named in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain who murdered two Negro girls, Hartman is unable to justify constructing an entire narrative that would ascribe more meaning to her existence without making a spectacle out of the body of the slave and its violent encounter with authority, which she believes would have only romanticized a conception of friendship the two girls never had the possibility of experiencing ("Venus" 8).

Because of the girls' brief appearances in the archive from which Hartman accumulates her information, Hartman finds herself unable to write a narrative that supports the subject formation of the slave in the archive since doing so would replicate a similar grammar of violence ("Venus" 4). She is unable to imagine 'what could have been' because the girls' appearances in the archive is so minimal, so steeped in the structural violence of the spectacular event that it reveals how the broken body of the slave is never glued back together in the archive, but presented in fragments with little to no cohesion ("Venus" 8). This speaks to the "libidinal investment in violence" that "is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past" ("Venus" 5). Thus, according to Hartman, it is best to leave blank the space where such replications of violence

usually take place in order to venerate or pay respect to the silenced knowledge(s) that make up the history of the oppressed. Thus, Hartman resists the hyper-visibility of blackness that is exhibited in representations of the violent spectacle, something Yuniór challenges in depicting the spectacular aftermath of Belicia's beating. By having Yuniór simultaneously ignore and foreclose the details of the spectacle as it happened in the moment, Díaz reminds us not only of the corrupt structures of power that beat down on the body, but how easily the body of the victim is brushed aside. Because although Belicia may have cried out each time she was struck, it is understood by Yuniór's question at the end of the chosen passage that she did not cry at all. "Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco," writes Yuniór to this effect, referring to his decision to omit certain aspects of Belicia's beating (*Oscar Wao* 149).

Instead of describing the acts themselves as they were enacted, however, Yuniór provides a list of every part of Belicia's body that is wounded or broken, an archive of broken limbs and body parts. As if drafting a police report, Yuniór writes:

Let me pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken-boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture (she would never again have much strength in that arm); five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out. About 167 points of damage in total and it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant-man proportions. Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it's not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly. (*Oscar Wao* 147)

Here, the violence that is lost by not describing in detail the acts themselves is reconstructed by language as the words gain the brutal materiality of violence in form and utterance. With respect to form, just as violence breaks people, so does the language of violence when it utterly breaks a paragraph. When read aloud, the list appears fragmented and choppy, creating a staccato that resembles the quick, impactful blows of Belicia's beating. The words, as they are uttered, begin to take up a violent shape. In other words, violence gains a materiality on the page.

But while these violent imprints on Belicia's body are a measurement of her existence in the present, the inability to be heard marks her disappearance in history, the archive, and language itself. It is with an acknowledgement of that reality that Yunior decides to leave blank spaces on the page, the "*páginas en blanco*" that represent the unheard voices of our past. Yet, in describing the aftermath, Yunior still replicates the violence of oppressive modes of punishment and regulation of the body. In doing so, Yunior reveals the libidinal investment in violence his text has even though what is fleshed out is a list describing the broken site of oppression in the aftermath of the spectacle of violence.

What the combination of violence with ontology reveals is that the dark-skinned Dominican subject during the Trujillato is irrevocably *bound up in* the violence of slavery and the Plantation simply by being. In other words, Belicia cannot *be* without being a site of applicability for the violence of anti-blackness. To better understand the relationship between these modes of subjection, the reader must first reconcile with the fact that these varying modalities of violent subjection are more similar than we would ever like to think. The tension generated by the juxtaposition

of all these modes of subjection through a narratorial pastiche, which is a common literary technique, creates discomfort of the kind one feels viscerally. We feel the destabilization within Díaz's words manifest in their imagined utterance, which is most poetic and performative when recited. If reciting is performative and writing is performative, then the recitation and writing of violent events—which according to Moten and Hartman often adopt the same grammar of violence from the real, even as they lose some of that validity and materiality in its representation and spectacularization—may also be violent.

Therefore, to write violence into the narrative, in some ways, is to write performatively. This is to mean that writing violence is, as a repetitive mode of expression, a performative act that reveals some of the hidden “grammar” or mechanisms that illuminate its very functions. If historiography is approached with this understanding, then one could trace violence throughout the development of the West and expose racial slavery's many reconfigurations throughout history. While such modes of racial and sexual violence as the ones depicted in Díaz's fiction and in sensationalist media become distinct and separate in their depiction as a narrative, the use of metaphor and rhythm on the page shows that these different modes of violence are actually in a dance with each other. The cacophonous Spanglish working like an air horn that has been superimposed over the brutal, bass-heavy beating down of the black body, physically and utterly with the utterance of remarks of disgust such as “pato,” the name Yunion calls the stranger on the autobus in “Ysrael” (*Drown* 12).

However, in translating violence onto the page, the writer loses part of its realness, which is somewhat compensated for with fiction. Yet, it is shown in

Hartman's essay that the archive rests upon a founding violence that "determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power ("Venus" 10). Like Hartman, Díaz attempts to recover the silenced past of Belicia, whom he previously compares to a slave. But while Hartman attempts to write Venus into existence and fails, Díaz emphasizes that failure by only writing into the archive the aftermath of the violent beating in all its silence. Yet, by focusing on Belicia's body and making her body the site of racial slavery's materialized affect, Yuniór uses the discursive act of producing an archive in order to access the sublime, incoherent reality of the corporeal after experiencing violence of a most extreme abjection. The goal was then never to provide a life-like description of her being, but rather to show how the body of the non-person is destroyed and never fully recovered, even as the material excess of the violence of anti-black racism and racialized slavery persists and manifests on the surface of black bodies. In other words, the function of Díaz's archive was never to recover the possibility of her existence, but to ruminate, rather painfully, with what constitutes the impossibility of her existence.

Yuniór's 'narratorial penetration' (as I like to remind the reader of the brutal materiality of language within his and my writing) is done with the violent forcefulness of the makings of the Diaspora as they forced collectives of Dominican bodies into flight. In other words, Yuniór violently enters into the archive the violence that makes him a minoritarian Dominican subject in the context of post-Diaspora New Jersey. However, this force is imbued with a different kind of desire: a desire for regeneration while also embracing alterity for posterity. The archive

becomes a way to self-preserve, not just the beauty, but also the horrors of black life; it becomes a repository of abnormality, which is instead celebrated through form.

Indeed, Díaz writes literature in, as, by and for difference, making room for queerness within the dominantly heteronormative Dominican identity, exposing the material and psychic reconfigurations of the violence of racial slavery that make Belicia, Lola and her daughter, Isis, sites for abjection in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Therefore, Junot Díaz, in constructing a historicizing project in the form of an alternative archive, enters the residual affect of the plantation into the greater discourses of our current historical moment. As readers, we are confronted with the heartbreakingly painful yet profoundly beautiful history of the Caribbean not through an exposition of spectacular violent events, but through a rumination with the ruinous affect of anti-black racism and the reconfigurations of racial slavery that continue to plague the world. Thus, Junot Díaz, as the embodiment of a historical archive of emotion, becomes violence in the archive.

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## Conclusion

Chapter 1 shows how the seemingly closed circle of the plantation is rendered porous, and how the ruinous landscape of the plantation travels on the ruined back of the slave. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how theories on contemporary reconfigurations of racial slavery can be read in Junot Díaz's alternative historical archive that grounds its knowledge on the historical emotions of the affect of the plantation. Finally, in Chapter 3, I provide close readings of scenes of abjection that highlight the mechanics of anti-black racism within the particular Dominican culture depicted in Díaz's fiction. I discover in that chapter that the language of violence on the page gains a certain materiality, in part because of the uncertainty of the archive of the slave.

My literary analysis of Junot Díaz's work stems from a profound investment in emotional thinking, which I find is often discarded as "soft" in lieu of something more tangible. A queer reading of Junot Díaz's work as the ephemeral remains of bodies marked for death, however, reveals that the narrator, Yuniors, actually returns to the "hard" epistemological knowledge of empirical evidence; the return to history, however, comes having been affected in the present by the fissures and ruptures of the past. These returns, which we read in the narrative, often involve depictions of violence that are hard to fully imagine, as it is impossible to recover the actuality of those experiences. Yet, these depictions, as if compensating for what has been lost, gain a violent materiality on the page, which I read as an affect in literature; that Díaz's narrative displays a libidinal investment in the violence these sorts of historical archives maintain. The continual investment in violence Díaz's fiction has must serve

some other purpose, if we are to come out with something *else*, if we, the readers of contemporary fiction, hope to view the world differently as a result.

To this end, I would emphasize the fertile grounds of the ‘landscape’ of Díaz’s poetics in his narrative. By calling his work fertile, I refer back to the dispossessed womb of the captive female. Taking the character of Hypatía Belicia Cabral as the locus of my literary analysis of Díaz’s fiction, I consider *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to be political performances that challenge dominant phallogentric hegemonic structures; literatures of memory that yearn for the presence of the female within an archive that aims to address those issues that make up our present. This longing for femininity is mimicked through the narrator’s sensitivity, which is then amplified by the abjection of his blackness and queerness as he becomes a more vulnerable citizen subject under the state.

Yet, it is this hope for femininity that his queerness holds, which for him, becomes a source of power in the performance of the archive. The political feelings constituted by the modes of subjection he persistently responds to with explosive emotions, transform his understanding of his depressive position as something worth looking, touching and feeling. Therefore, feeling becomes a mode of resisting the dominant universalizing scripts of hegemonic discourse—the kind Muñoz retaliates against in his essay "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" (2006).

To regard his works as queer acts is to say also that Junot Díaz’s writings disrupt totalizing identitarian categories. It is through the repeated offerings of depressive structures of feelings, that Díaz generates what José Muñoz in his essay

“Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative” (2009) considers to be ‘the real force of performance,’ in which its ability to generate a multiplicity of modalities of knowing and recognition actually facilitate alternate modes of belonging, especially for the minoritarian subject, and even more relevantly, for the Diasporic subject (99). This is to say, finally, that his language, which is tied to no particular place or belonging, but instead suspends space and time, constitutes a utopian performativity, a manifestation of a political doing through *feeling* that is a mode of possibility. Thus, Junot Díaz’s Afro-Caribbean literary imagination thrusts us, with the force of Diaspora, into what Muñoz regards as the *then* and *there* of queer futurity.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).

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