

## Secrets of Sex: Dictating Romance in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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### Abstract

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* resists an easy summarization. Díaz's novel crisscrosses time and space, from the 1940s Dominican Republic to Paterson, New Jersey, in the 1990s, and interweaves the story of Oscar, Dominican American "fat" "nerd," and his other family members. Narrated by an unnamed narrator who turns out to be Oscar's college friend, *Oscar Wao* moves back and forth between the horrifying lives in the DR under dictatorship and Oscar's quest to lose virginity—both sad and farcical—to become a "Dominican" man in his diasporic community. In addition to tortuous plots, Díaz's novel presents a gala of linguistic and narrative techniques, such as intentionally obfuscated viewpoints, untranslated Spanish, extensive footnotes on Dominican history, and numerous "otaku" references to "nerd" lit—sci-fi, fantasy, and anime. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Oscar Wao* has been showered with praises and invited strikingly diverse critical work which homes in on the novel's key issues, including diaspora, intertextuality, and gendered stereotypes of race.

My presentation hopes to tackle the romantic ending of the novel which remains curiously unexamined in prior criticism. While Oscar finally has sex with an aging prostitute in the DR and is killed for it by Dominican thugs, this violent end to "the brief tragic life of Oscar" is painted as a positive conclusion. But is not Oscar's death too high a price for the "beauty! The beauty!" (335) of sex, the final words of the novel? Can all the personal and political/historical struggle of diasporic subjects be resolved through the "little intimacies" (334) Oscar discovers to be the big secret of sex? Although Díaz notes in an interview that the ending is not as important as the quest towards it, I would argue that this romanticized ending risks compromising the radical rethinking of conventional narrative and racialized sexuality successfully undertaken throughout the novel.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, transnational American literature, diaspora, masculinities