Solidarity and Critical Whiteness in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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In 2021, the world of anti-racist activists, critical race theorists, feminists, literary scholars, and critical thinkers lost the Black feminist activist and writer bell hooks. In her numerous publications and talks she positioned herself as ardent critic and radical analyzer of the intersectional oppressions caused by racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. In her text "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women"[1], she laid out the adversarial power dynamics that split the feminist movement of her time along the lines of race[2] and class. According to hooks, the concept of 'Sisterhood' originally stood for unconditional solidarity among women*[3], but was all too often wrongly appropriated by *white* feminists: Instead of recognizing racialized and classed differences in women's lived realities, 'Sisterhood' was used by *white* bourgeois feminists to build an illusive common ground of victimhood, effectively excluding the experiences and voices of Black women and women of color. Further, by cultivating this act of colorblindness,[4] they perpetuated a powerful affective dynamic that protected *white* women* from feeling bad about their own complicity in

1 hooks, bell: Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women. In: Feminist Review 23(1986) 125–138. https://doi.org/10.2307/1394725.

2 Contrary to discourses in Germany, the concept and term of 'race' is established and used in academic and non-academic discourses in the United States. In terms of definition, I follow Paula Moya's and Hazel Markus' explanation, as laid out in her book *Doing Race*: "Contrary to what most people believe, race and ethnicity are not *things* that people *have* or *are*. Rather, they are *actions* that people *do*. Race and ethnicity are social, historical, and philosophical *processes* that people have done for hundreds of years and are still doing. They emerge through the social transactions that take place among different kinds of people, in a variety of institutional structures […] over time, across space, and in all kinds of situations" (Markus, Hazel Rose/Moya, Paula M L.: Doing Race. 21 Essays for the 21st Century, New York 2010, 4).

3 The asterisk here represents the category of women as a gender inclusive subject position, not restricted to biologist markers or social attributions.

4 The politics of colorblindness is rooted in the belief that in order to eliminate race and racism, one simply has to 'not see' color. Colorblindness has been described and discussed as counter-productive and harmful, as it erases discourses and efforts that make visible racial structures, hierarchies, and disparities. Colorblindness silences and sugarcoats racialized re-

the system of *white* supremacy. Instead of acknowledging and analyzing the existing differences between women*, a colorblind, *white* Sisterhood was cultivated only to cater to feelings of *white* comfort. hooks convincingly and unapologetically exposes the connections between colorblindness, acts of exclusion, and *white* feelings. She thereby points towards the *white* activists' illusion of relegating the perpetrator, the enemy, the sexist, the racist only to the *outside*, instead of acknowledging and reflecting on their own racist actions and complicities: They "did not acknowledge and confront the enemy *within*. They were not prepared to forego privilege and do the 'dirty work' […] that is necessary in the development of radical political consciousness, the first task being honest critique and evaluation of one's social statues, values, political beliefs, etc.".[5] While never leaving external structures of systemic oppression out of sight, hooks also always turns towards internalized forms of racism and sexism. To her, working through the inner workings of hostility is the ultimate consequence and necessity of solidarity.

Although most of her works were published in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, hooks' impact is still present today and resonates through numerous references in academic talks and papers. Her ideas and observations make epilogues to novels and scholarly texts, they cover feminist merchandise like tote bags and t-shirts, or cardboard signs at feminist marches. For the field of literary studies, her essay on "Sisterhood" initiates considerations concerning the impact that contemporary literature can have on thinking about solidarity and *whiteness*: What does contemporary literature potentially do that speaks to hooks' remarks on (failed) solidarity, of her critique regarding colorblindness and *white* comfort? How does contemporary literature make us engage with questions of solidarity and *whiteness*? And, ultimately, how does that literature make us engage in the 'dirty work' that hooks identified as indispensable for the creation of solidary bonds?

In a reading of Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[6] (2009), I hope to not only pay tribute to bell hooks' intellectual work on solidarity, but to also discuss answers to the questions posed above. *Oscar Wao* is narrated by Yunior who also appears as a character in the story. Covering the years from 1944 until the late 1990s, he tells the story of Oscar's family – his mother Beli, his sister Lola, and his grandfather, Abelard. Beli, fleeing from the dictatorship of Trujillo, goes into exile in the United States, where she raises Lola and Oscar, an overweight comic-nerd who finds refuge in role games, sci-fi novels, fantasy language, and the ever-lasting search for true love. By telling the story of the family de León, Yunior

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alities, rather than generating equality. See, for example, Eddo-Lodge, Reni: Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race, London 2018, 82f.

5 hooks: Sisterhood, 128f, my emphasis.

6 Díaz, Junot: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, New York 2007. In the following *Oscar Wao*.

also engages in the project of narrating the history of the Dominican Republic by including accounts about the multifaceted devastations that colonialism, US imperialism, and dictatorships have instilled in the country and its people. My reading of *Oscar Wao* continues hooks' discussion by focusing on structural and formal features of the novel that specifically expose hegemonic constructions of *whiteness*. To that end I will approach Díaz's text with an interdisciplinary frame of literary studies and critical whiteness studies. This framework enables me to consider the literary form of *Oscar Wao* and its effect on the reader, and to bring it in conversation with constructions of *whiteness* that are manifested in its alleged absence and universality. Thereby, it is not my intention to recenter *whiteness*, or to make visible what is invisible *and* hypervisible at the same time.[7] Instead, I want to highlight structures and modes in *Oscar Wao* that make *whiteness* visible to shed light on its disabling potential for creating solidary bonds. As I will show, these moments of exposure generate responses of discomfort and *white* fragility and thereby offer moments of self-reflective work that bell hooks deemed necessary for a sincere solidary act of Sisterhood.

In order to bring my reading of *Oscar Wao* and bell hooks' elaboration on *whiteness* and solidarity into conversation, this contribution will focus on three aspects: First, I will discuss the emotional dimension of *white* fragility that *Oscar Wao* elicits. I read the engagement with this affective response as the 'dirty work' that bell hooks sees lacking in *white* feminists' activist work. In the second section I want to focus on the novel as a European bourgeois literary form. By focusing on dynamics and responses inside and outside Díaz's work, I will show how his novel responds to a larger decolonial critique that bell hooks already initiated with regard to *white* bourgeois feminist movements. Finally, I will explore the novel's capacity to narrate through difference. hooks sees difference, diversity, and alteration as pivotal to generating solidary bonds. Through its narrative structures the novel generates a story-telling mode that is a collective project and thereby questions *white* expectations of story-telling and representation.

7 Maureen Reddy points out: "Whiteness […] seems invisible, transparent, to those who are white […]. In contrast, whiteness makes itself hypervisible to those who are not white" (Reddy, Maureen T.: Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness. In: *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 9(1998) H. 2, 55–64. https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/43587107, 55).

1. White Fragility in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Aliza Hausman writes as an introductory statement on her blog *Memoirs of a Jewminicana*:

> I'm sick of hearing people say they feel like they can't understand 'The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao' [sic] because of all those Spanish terms. Why didn't Junot Diaz [sic] and his lovely publishers throw in some sort of glossary in the back? Just what were they thinking? We'll never know.[8]

Hausman then provides an expansive list with translations for the many Spanish phrases and links to encyclopedia websites that explain the meaning of the numerous intertextual references that *Oscar Wao* includes. As literary scholar Rune Graulund notes, apart from standard American English, the most prominent languages and codes in the novel comprise: "(1) […] standard Spanish; (2) Dominican Spanish; (3) street-speak English; (4) Spanglish; (5) nerd-speak" as well as "academic jargon" (32–3). I would add to this list the many pop-cultural, intertextual references as a sixth form of symbolic signifier to Marvel superheroes, comics, and role game figures. Through the use of many different linguistic registers, Díaz makes readers know a (fictional) world from which they are potentially and partially excluded via language and codes. Similar to the first blog entry, the following one shows how much frustration this exclusion causes and how much work reading *Oscar Wao* entails:

> This [blog] is fantastic! I'm still only a third into the book and, while I'm interested in using a translating program to find out the Spanish meaning, I'd rather stay on the couch with my novel than go check the computer. It loses the flow. As soon as I found your glossary, I printed it out and stapled it into my book. I know it will improve my reading of the book now! (Bernice)[9]

I argue that the feeling of frustration is connected to the construction of *whiteness* as removed, invisible, and as assuming a neutral positionality. The text's use of many languages and references challenges the readers' position as absent spectators, forces them to do physical work (get up, print pages, staple them, etc.), and to engage with concomitant feelings of frustration. Readers cannot simply lie on the sofa, enjoy the privilege of accessing the text, and comfortably glide into the wondrous worlds of fiction. Instead, the text constantly exposes their ignorance

8 Hausman, Aliza: The Oscar Wao Vocabulary Dictionary Glossary, You're Welcome, Junot Diaz. In: Memoirs of a Jewminicana, 28 Dec. 2016. https://alizahausman.com/2008/12/09/the-oscar-wao-vocabulary-dictionary-glossary-youre-welcome-junot-diaz/.

9 Ebd., Posted June 5, 2009 at 8:42 pm.

and lack of knowledge, which not only requires them to engage in extra work, but also engenders an emotional response which I frame as what sociologist Robin DiAngelo terms *white* fragility: "White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress" (DiAngelo 54). She describes *white* fragility here with regards to its socio-affective dimensions in North American society. The notion of 'racial protection' and 'racial comfort' reminds us of bell hooks' observations of *white* feminists' shielding off racial stress through the politics of colorblindness. *Oscar Wao*, likewise, affectively undermines the alleged normalcy of *whiteness* as it causes moments of fragility not only through its many language registers and codes, but also through its form and structure.

As mentioned earlier, Yunior is narrator and fictional author of *Oscar Wao*. He is not removed or outside the story, but positions himself as the writer of it, while also appearing as a character. Throughout the novel, Yunior time and again addresses the reader directly as 'you'. While this could be read as a moment of connection and inclusion ('hey you, reader, good to have you on board!'), or a welcoming move as in a 'Note to the Reader – let me explain to you how this story is going to work,' Yunior uses the asides towards the reader to unsettle the reading position by constantly altering the proximity between text and reader. Very often, he uses footnotes, 33 in total, to add information to the plot proper and to address the reader. Instead of using footnotes as objective, quasi-academic textual space to provide context, Yunior keeps narrating through them in his rather uncouth attitude. Two very striking examples are the footnotes 1 and 5:

> 1. For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality.[10]
> […]
> 5. […] during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either) […].[11]

By directly confronting the reader, the narrator subverts the role of the spectator: While the reader usually 'watches,' or rather, reads along the events of the story, the text in the footnotes looks back at the reader. The novel opens with a rather broad

10 Díaz, Oscar Wao, 2, fn 1.

11 Ebd., 19, fn 5.

perspective on the era of European colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of Africans, which, according to Yunior, brought an unredeemable curse, the *fukú*, to the Caribbean.[12] Very much following the features of a historical novel, the text initially grants a distance between the narrated events and the readers' involvement in them. Readers are spectators (albeit not un-moved) following the story from a comfortable distance of removed *whiteness*. It is safe to watch the wrong-doings of long-gone imperialists and historical villains. However, through the footnotes Yunior dismantles this safe distance of being removed, and puts readers on the spot. The *white* gaze is being disrupted, and the history of enslavement, imperialism, and colonialism is now looking back at 'you,' the *white* spectator. By setting the contemporary reader in direct connection to issues of violent events of the past, Yunior dissolves the temporal border between long-gone history and the readers' presence, between then and now. He thereby makes visible how the system of *white* supremacy has never ceased, but has merely changed form and continues, for example, in the privilege of ignorance. Further, readers have no chance to relegate any form of decolonial criticism to a more distanced diegetic level ('it's all just in the story'), but are faced with the fictional author directly confronting them. Thus, it is not only through moments of immediate exclusion via language, but also through the role of the narrator and the textual space of the footnote that *Oscar Wao* calls into question historical construction of *whiteness* as being removed and unmarked.

Does that mean that *Oscar Wao* is not meant for readers who assume a *white* subject position? That they are entirely left out of the intended readership? No, of course not. Literary critic Sean O'Brien states that despite *Oscar Wao*'s overflow of untranslated languages, the text seems to always provide just enough intelligibility to follow along.[13] One could argue that the author is the only person who can fully understand the novel's many registers and references, which, otherwise, create a complex dynamic of distance and proximity, access and exclusion. In terms of language registers and codes, it seems that *Oscar Wao* is written for everyone and for no-one. In terms of positionality, it leaves open who the intended readership is. I consider this open question a relevant one, particularly when turning towards deliberations of what the text might reveal about different communities and positionalities of readers. The text establishes flexible relations to readers that engender a self-reflective process based on, i.e., moments of exclusion and feelings of frustration. I therefore want to reiterate my point concerning constructions of *whiteness*: *Oscar Wao* takes *whiteness* out of its assumed position of being removed from the text and of being absent from long-gone historical events. It provides the opportunity for readers to

12 Vgl. ebd., 1.

13 Vgl. O'Brien, Sean: Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and 'The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao'. In: The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 45(2012) H. 1, 75–94. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43150831, 76.

reflect on their own entanglements and complicities in the ongoing history of *white* supremacy. The engagement with resulting feelings of irritation and frustration, of *white* fragility, as expressed by the bloggers, is exactly what enables the 'dirty work' that bell hooks asked for.

2. Writing Back to Bourgeois Ideals

One major point of critique that bell hooks repeatedly discussed in her text is that *white* feminists turned feminism a bourgeois class endeavor that excluded women's voices from lower social classes of all ethnic backgrounds: "[W]e cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberationists".[14] *White* women, hooks argued, theorized and enacted feminism through their ideals and worked towards their retention, as they saw these ideals to be universal, superior, and worth striving for. Other interpretations of feminist activism, other forms and perspectives were neglected and deemed adversarial to the cause.[15] Interestingly, the development of the novel as literary form shows parallels to hooks' observations concerning political activism: Literary scholar Mariano Siskind elaborates on the role of the novel during the era of European Enlightenment and draws a connection between the rise of the novel and the distribution of European bourgeois ideals: "Because the novel was the hegemonic form that bourgeois imagination adopted in the nineteenth century, and because of the aesthetic and political force of the social totalities it was capable of constructing, most novels dealing with distant places produced powerful images of the globalization of bourgeois culture"[16]. The parallel that I see in hooks' and Siskind's elaborations is that both, activism and the novel, constitute powerful forms through which hegemonic *white* and bourgeois ideals were distributed, represented, and maintained.

How do considerations concerning those ideals and the novel relate to Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao*? The beginning(s) of *Oscar Wao* offer ample possible connections here: The narrator begins the story by describing the curse that the enslavement of Africans through European colonizers had brought about the Caribbean:

> They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved […] that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was

14 hooks: Sisterhood, 128.

15 Vgl. ebd., 129.

16 Siskind, Mariano: The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global. A Critique of World Literature. In: D'haen, Theo/Domínguez, César/Rosendahl, Mads (Hg.): *World Literature. A Reader*, London 2010, 329–352, 330.

> cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus* […] – the Curse and the Doom of the New World.[17]

These opening lines of Díaz's literary work read like a testimony to the repercussions of European globalization. While the European bourgeoisie in the 19th century considered the imperialist and colonialist endeavors to be a useful and necessary means to spread their enlightened principles and ethics (for example, via the novel)[18], *Oscar Wao* directly confronts the readers in the 21st century with the horrors that these endeavors generated. He thereby refutes any myths that the phase of European Enlightenment was an era of universal progress and improvement and allows a different story to be told.

bell hooks states that one way to maintain their hegemonic power position within the feminist movement was for *white* women to assume a commonality of victimhood. Not only does hooks hold victimhood to be a detrimental position to activism as it negates agency and power that women own despite all hardship; also, she points out that the belief of a shared ground of oppression is a manipulative myth of *white* women/womanhood.[19] Their insistence on common victimhood disabled solidary bonds as it rendered different realities invisible. According to hooks, it is through the acknowledgement of the various disadvantages and capacities that different and appropriate feminist responses can be generated. It is only by refuting the myth of common victimhood that solidary feminist bonds can originate. Instead of following only the ideals, interpretations, and theories of bourgeois *white* women, hooks encourages us to see feminist movements as an umbrella term under which many different voices and perspectives can hold – perspectives that are inevitable to engage with in order to work towards social justice. I read *Oscar Wao*'s opening as a similar take: He uses the novel as an umbrella medium through which a different perspective to the one of European Enlightenment and 19th century bourgeoisie can be told. He does not tell this story between the lines, subliminally or indirectly, but positions it right at the very beginning of his story. It is this perspective on history that functions as a gate through which readers enter the story. Of course, over the centuries the novel has been appropriated and developed through a myriad of authors, stories, influences, and agendas. But when following Siskind's conception of the novel as a bourgeois medium of 19th-century European globalization, Díaz's choice of opening reads like a response, like a correction, and a diversification of (hi)stories which can enable bonds of solidarity.

The beginning quoted above, however, is not the only one in the novel. *Oscar Wao*'s many beginnings and endings make it even more interesting with regard to

17 Díaz, Oscar Wao, 1.

18 Siskind, The Globalization of the Novel, 330.

19 hooks: Sisterhood, 127.

conceptions of the novel as a bourgeois medium: Characteristic of the European novel is the aspect of 'bildung' – of a character's gradual progress towards intellectual autonomy and self-improvement through reason and morality. The title of Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, alludes to such a progress, as it sets out to tell the life-story of Oscar, as brief and wondrous as it may be. In order to frame progress, a story needs a definitive beginning and ending that *Oscar Wao* does not provide: The first beginning of the novel reads like a mystical historical novel, in which a yet absent narrator takes the readers to the curses, horrors, and wonders of the Caribbean. In a following chapter, the narrative perspective switches to Lola, Oscar's sister, who tells her story to Yunior. In her accounts she focuses on incidents about her family and her youth, leaving the reader wondering whether the novel is now her story. After switching back to Yunior, all subsequent chapters (and sometimes footnotes) imply new beginnings or the re-telling of a story: "[b]efore there was an American Story [...] there was their mother Hypatía Belicia Cabral"[20], "It started with me. The year before Oscar fell, [...]"[21], "[w]hen the family talks about it at all – which is like never – they always begin in the same place [...]"[22], and a footnote saying: "There are other beginnings certainly..."[23], in which Yunior considers the 'discovery' of the New World, or the U.S. invasion in 1916 to be alternative beginnings appropriate for the story. The same pattern is true for the ending of the novel: Chapter 7 is entitled "The Final Voyage" including a subchapter entitled "The Last Days of Oscar Wao." At the end of this chapter, Oscar, the (anti-)hero of the novel, is being shot; however, the novel does not conclude with his life's end. The following 8th chapter, "The End of the Story" includes a section "On A Super Final Note"[24], only to be followed by "The Final Letter," which after two and a half pages brings the novel eventually to an end. Not only does the novel present to us Oscar as an obese, nerdy, depressed, and constantly heart-broken anti-hero who is far from undergoing a progress that European 'bildung' would have predicted. It, too, does not offer the form through which readers could identify and witness any progress – neither for the characters, nor for the development of the story. *Oscar Wao* does not cater to readers' expectations or to European traditions of linearity and progress but follows its very own urge to simply and somehow tell story and history. It therefore requires readers to create an alternative mode of engaging with the text, similar to hooks call to "define our own terms"[25] with regard to forming bonds and connections outside of *white* bourgeois dominance.

20 Díaz, Oscar Wao, 77.
21 Ebd., 167.
22 Ebd., 211.
23 Ebd., 211, fn 22.
24 Ebd., 324.
25 hooks: Sisterhood, 129.

A glance towards critics' futile attempts to allocate *Oscar Wao* to a specific genre shows that *Oscar Wao* not only plays with the notion of genre as art form of the novel, but also undermines genres that allocate books according to specific expectations: While Monica Hanna describes *Oscar Wao* as a "*Künstlerroman*"[26], Elena Machado Sáez introduces it as "seductive novel"[27], and Daniel Bautista relates it to "fantastic literature," "tropical magic realism," and "punk-rock feminism"[28], literary critic Michiko Kakutani for *The New York Times* seems to have given up completely on coming up with any traditional literary genre categories and describes the novel as "Mario Vargas Llosa meets 'Star Trek' meets David Foster Wallace meets Kanye West"[29]. Their rather creative bafflement expresses a conflict arising from the familiarity of the form 'the' novel and what *Oscar Wao* actually does. *Oscar Wao* is considered to belong to the 'New Global Novel,' to 'Contemporary Transnational Literature,' and even to a more radical and disputed form of 'Postrace Literature'. Novels published under these genre labels continue, but also refute, the legacy of postcolonial writing, as they negotiate not only the (European) form of the novel and the hegemonic position of the English language, but also the representations of diasporic communities and immigrants' experiences in a globalized and digitalized 21st century.[30] Authors of these books macerate and problematize seemingly dichotomous groups of 'them' and 'us' and refuse the role of a spokesperson or representative for an alleged homogenous community. They write about their own complicities in *white* supremacy and sexist structures, while unapologetically pointing towards any forms of racism and xenophobic traditions in contemporary U.S. society. They juggle various languages, dialects and slangs, and experiment with different forms of writing – not necessarily to please the readership, but to make their kaleidoscopic stories tellable. The many linguistic registers and the footnotes, discussed above serve as a fitting example, of course. These texts make use of the form of the novel, but play with it and fill it with contemporary diasporic and immigrant structures and content. They take the novel, and continue

26 Hanna, Monica: A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Cannibalist. Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination. In: Hanna, Monica/Vargas, Jennifer Hardord/Saldívar, José David (Hg.): Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination, Durham 2016, 89–111. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374763-005, 89.

27 Machado Sáez, Elena: Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao As Foundational Romance. In: *Contemporary Literature* 52(2011) H. 3, 522–555. https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2011.0029, 522.

28 Bautista, Daniel: Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In: Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 21(2010) H. 1, 41–53, 41.

29 Kakutani, Michiko: Travails of an Outcast. In: The New York Times, 4 Sept. 2007. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/books/04diaz.html.

30 See, i.e., works by Ocean Vuong, Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Edwidge Danticat, Elaine Castillo, Daphne Palasi Andreades.

the postcolonial tradition of leading it further and further away from its legacy of being mere medium for European bourgeois ideals. The novel therefore is and ever more becomes an umbrella that enables a myriad of perspectives, voices, forms, beginnings, and endings, through which any myths of commonality and universal ideals are challenged.

3. Speaking through Difference

In this last section I want to discuss bell hooks' insistence on acknowledging difference and diversity as an asset for solidarity. The previous discussion concerning the form of the novel and *white* bourgeois ideals already touched upon this issue. bell hooks encourages her readers to learn "to gain strength from our diversity".[31] While this quote reads like a rather general and abstract assignment, hooks specifies it by elaborating on the significance of learning languages, cultural customs, and of doing research about each other's backgrounds. These abilities, and, more importantly, the willingness to achieve them, turn feminist gatherings into productive and joyous events.[32] She capitalizes on the ability to communicate not only *via* different language and different codes, but also to nurture a self-reflective capacity to talk *about* those differences.[33] According to her, this ability enabled her and her students to feel "a sense of community, of Sisterhood".[34] Hence, it is not merely the dissolution of all difference through learning all languages and codes, but rather the permission to acknowledge and discuss difference appreciatively that generates solidary bonds. By focusing on narrating aspects of the story-telling process, I want to show how *Oscar Wao* enables readers to engage with difference on various levels. Yunior includes different voices (apart from the aforementioned different languages) and thereby not only gives up narrative authority, but also encourages readers to deal with perspectives that are contrary to fixed believes and perceptions. Further, the novel adjusts the role of the reader according to its 'need', forcing readers once again out of their assumed removed position somewhere outside the text. These communicative dynamics not only encourage readers to deal with difference and diversity for the sake of engendering a sense of Sisterhood; they are also connected to constructions of *whiteness*.

As mentioned earlier, the second chapter of the novel changes the narrative situation. The section opens with a text set in italics addressing a 'you', which is not the reader. Compared to the first part of the book, the tone changes with a more soft and

31 hooks: Sisterhood, 134.

32 Vgl. ebd., 134f.

33 Vgl. ebd., 135.

34 Vgl. ebd.

considerate vocabulary, and less slang. Later, when readers learn about the romantic relationship between Lola and Yunior, it becomes clear that the intimate, caring (however still cunning) voice was indeed Yunior's. It is therefore not his function as narrator that determines the tone of and the proximity to the text but *his* relation to the events and to the characters he tells readers about. From the narrator's accounts it becomes clear that the 'you' means Lola, Oscar's sister who, after three pages of cursive text, takes over as a part-time narrator of the novel. Lola's account is a transcript from a recording that Yunior made of her. Throughout the entire novel, Yunior includes hearsay and recordings into his story: "The moon, it has been reported, was full […]"[35]; "It was also reported that Oscar drooled on himself […]".[36] Two sections are specifically entitled with "LA INCA SPEAKS" and "YBÓN, AS RECORDED BY OSCAR".[37] Although the novel sets out to narrate *the* life story of Oscar, Yunior as fictive author of that book time and again gives up his narrative authority over the storytelling process and turns the novel into a collective and subjective project. This book does not tell *the* story of Oscar de León, neither does it tell *the* story of the Dominican Republic, and it also is not told by one narrator alone. It is not (only) through the narrator's direct negation of telling the truth or of composing a complete version of the story, but through the text's inclusion of transcribed recordings that the story is represented by many, rather than by one. I want to connect the question of representation to constructions of *whiteness* to make hooks' rather vague ascriptions quoted above more tangible and relatable: Scholar and activist Peggy McIntosh considers it a *white* privilege to never having to speak for the entirety of her racial group.[38] People of Color, however, are often relegated into the position of a spokesperson for their community. By putting other characters 'on speaker' via the recordings, *Oscar Wao* refutes a narrative structure that fulfills any expectations concerning one-for-all representation. Instead, it presents a conglomerate of voices which in its entirety, creates the most integral version of the story that the fictive author deemed appropriate.

Of course, by including the recordings and references of hearsay, the narrator runs at risk to include conflicting or uncomfortable perspectives: As a young woman, Beli, Oscar's mother, is in a relationship with a man called 'the Gangster.' The Gangster is an associate of Trujillo, and Yunior makes it clear that he is engaged in multiple crimes which he executes for the dictator. However, by telling Beli's story and her connection to the Gangster, we also get to know a different side of him: Through her

35 Díaz, Oscar Wao, 146.

36 Ebd., 273.

37 Ebd., 289.

38 McIntosh, Peggy: White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack (1989) 1. In: Dies.: *On Privilege, Fraudulence, and Teaching As Learning*, New York 2019, 29–34. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351133791-4, 30.

experiences, Yunior depicts him as traumatized, beaten, and desperate. Yunior, as narrator and fictional author of the book, owns a high level of authority of the storytelling and the interpretation of events. Showing the soft side of the Gangster could therefore be interpreted as a redemption for him, and in extension as an embellishment of the Trujillo regime. However, to navigate the different experiences and impressions of that one character, Yunior lets Beli speak for herself when describing her physical and sexual encounters with the Gangster: "It felt unbelievably good to Beli, shook her to her core. (*For the first time I actually felt like I owned my skin, like it was me and I was it.*)".[39] The line set in italics visually mark the words as hers, not as Yunior's. By quoting her directly, Yunior is able to include another side of the Gangster without risking to redeeming him, personally, for his deeds and his complicities. Through Beli's accounts readers learn what the Gangster was *also* like, whether it fits any judgements about him, or not. Of course, the reader is not forced to develop any feelings of sympathy for the Gangster (also not after reading how traumatized he is through the violence he encounters and enacts while being on missions for the dictator). But the mere fact that this perspective is granted space in the text, that Beli's experiences with him are shared, avoids a singular narrative about good and bad in the novel and allows readers to grapple with the diverse complexities and relationships that life stories bring with them.

As a last discussion concerning the dynamics of difference that the novel enables, I want to return to the role of the reader. As I have discussed earlier, Yunior uses footnotes to address readers directly. While these moments potentially generate feelings of discomfort, or *white* fragility by disrupting *whiteness*' alleged removed position, they also demonstrate the narrator's wish to get into a conversation. The tone in the footnotes emphasize a clear identifiable 'we' versus 'you,' but throughout the novel, this dichotomous relationality changes:

> Between 1930 […] and 1961 […] Santo Domingo was the Caribbean's very own Peaksville, with Trujillo playing the part of Anthony […]. You might roll your eyes at the comparison, but, friends: it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people […].[40]

Yunior addressing the reader here as 'friends' contrasts his rather reproachful tone in the first footnote. Yet, the narrator does not fully give up nagging the reader as too ignorant, naïve, or posh. The relationship that Yunior maintains to the intended readers throughout the novel is flexible and changes according to what he wants to share and how he wants to address the reader. Any sentiments of friendship or sympathy are solely dependent on Yunior's willingness to establish them, and they only

39 Díaz, Oscar Wao, 127.

40 Ebd., 224.

last as long as he wants them to. He never releases the readers into a position of redemption in which they can take care of uncomfortable feelings of fragility, frustration, and *white* tears. Once readers relax into a position of amenable connection to the narrator, which he himself establishes, he will cast them as ignorant and elitist outsiders again, only to then buddy up with the readers once more to laugh with them at the expense of Oscar. I interpret this flexible relation that Yunior cultivates as a pivotal tool to prevent readers from turning *Oscar Wao* into a 'healing reading experience': bell hooks observed that in feminist movements, *white* women engaged with their own involvement in racism only as a "cathartic experience"[41] that benefitted solely themselves but never translated into actual solidarity or political action. After learning about their own complicity in racist structures and actions, *white* women would use this insight only to stylize themselves as victims who were turned into racists by a *white* supremacist system. Yunior's autonomous and flexible connection to the reader shares similarities in that it prevents readers from making this novel a cathartic reading experience for themselves: Just because the narrator addresses them as 'friends' does not mean that the novel will release the reader in a redeemed position in which all ignorance, privileges, and complicities are oblivious and forgotten. Rather, the flexibility of the narrator expresses the different roles, voices, attitudes that *he* needs to employ in order to tell this story right. I read the readers' task to grapple with this flexibility as part of the 'dirty work' that bell hooks has asked *white* people and feminists to do: The experience readers can gain from reading *Oscar Wao* is not a cathartic or a healing one that lets them indulge in *white* tears. The solidary act does not lie in a (shared) victimhood, but in taking on the role as unconditional reader, or audience, ready to read of and listen to stories, as uncomfortable and revealing as they might be.

4. On A Super Final Note

Oscar Wao negotiates solidarity on different textual levels. In her text "Asian Latino Conflict and Solidarity in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Paula C. Park focuses on the characters' constellations and interracial relations in the story. Due to the fact that all characters are haunted by misfortunes and suffer under the violent oppressions of Trujillo, she argues that marginalized groups form solidary alliances of resistance[42], despite the anti-Black or anti-Asian racism that characters

41 hooks: Sisterhood, 133.

42 Park, Paula C.: Asian Latino Conflict and Solidarity in Díaz's the Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In: *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17(2015) H. 2. https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2511, 6.

enact towards each other. Also, I'd argue, we find solidarity in the form of unconditional support and help in Yunior's and Oscar's friendship, and Oscar's relationship to his sister. However, in order to elaborate and discuss some of the key aspects of bell hooks' critique concerning the toxic intersections of race, class, and political activism, I found it particularly helpful to consider structural and formal aspects of the novel. By constantly negotiating the role of and the proximity between narrator and readership, as well as reappropriating aspects of the genre and the form of the novel, *Oscar Wao*, as a literary work, writes back to power dynamics of *white* (bourgeois) supremacy that bell hooks had already criticized in feminist activism. *Oscar Wao* invites readers, sometimes forces them, to grapple with feelings of frustration, surprise, entertainment, and irritation. It is through the role of the narrator, the function of the footnotes, and the effect of the recordings that the text demands emotional labor from the reader *as* solidary work. Bringing bell hooks' text on solidarity and *whiteness* into conversation with a contemporary literary work contributes to what literary scholar Paula Moya calls 'racial literacy': "becoming racially literate involves examining the relationship between race and power, attending always to the structural, as well as the individual and interpersonal, nature of race".[43] In my understanding this does not only include 'seeing' race in a literary text, or reading for race in an academic paper, or formulating critique about *white* supremacist representations in a story; it also includes listening to the ways that texts critique readers' positionality, particularly as hegemonic.

To use a text that was written and published in the 1980s and to bring it in conversation with a literary text from the 2010s bears the risk of forced connections between texts and authors. However, I wanted to follow Rita Felski's argument that historical periods are not "coffinlike containers"[44] in which intellectual thought, insights, and criticism fall into an eternal slumber of historicity. Especially by focusing on structural features of *Oscar Wao*, I argue that 1980s Black feminist thought very much resonates with issues concerning *white* supremacy addressed in literatures 30 years later. In interviews and essays Junot Díaz oftentimes refers to scholars and writers such as Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and bell hooks, and emphasizes the fact that his work speaks to their legacy. Of course, ever since Roland Barthes had proclaimed the 'death of the author' in the 1960s, it has been deemed rather uncritical, short-sighted, sometimes even pathologizing to read a literary work through the life of the author. In the case of Junot Díaz (and many of his contemporaries), however, acknowledging biographical aspects can help to make different positionalities more visible on the literary market, but also in the literary

43 Moya, Paula: The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism. Redwood City, 2015, 32.

44 Felski, Rita: Context Stinks! In: New Literary History 42(2011) H. 4, 573–591. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2011.0045, 590.

imagination. I therefore want to close with a quote by the author himself, in which he expresses the joy and excitement that comes from getting into conversation about and through difference:

> It was really fun to have these different registers going on and to force communities – it's not to say that the intellectual language is exclusively for a certain group, but I knew a lot of the Dominican kids I grew up with weren't going to know who the fuck Foucault was – but I thought it was real nice to put all these people together in one room and to see if they could speak to each other.[45]

Díaz's excitement concerning people exchanging their different reading experiences of his novel relies on the notion of difference – and it is this notion of joyous difference that bell hooks had called for 30 years earlier. Fictional texts in their literariness, their formal, affective, and aesthetic capacities, and political texts, like bell hooks', can therefore form a meaningful symbiosis to continue theorizing and enacting solidarity.

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45 qtd. in Chien, Evelyn Nien-Ming: Weird English, Cambridge 2004, 203.

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