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**The Geek vs. the Goat: Popcultural Politics in  
Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

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People tell you, “you can’t write a political story.” “I don’t write politics.” You’ve heard that from writers? Well, that’s totally not me. I have an agenda to write politics without letting the reader think it is political. (Junot Díaz qtd. in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 901)

Junot Díaz’s goal, to be political without seeming political, derives from a concern about appearing polemical—that is, writing a novel whose artifice is overwhelmed by ideology. Even acknowledging that politics plays a central role in his writing, Díaz recognizes, is to go against U.S. literary culture’s belief in the primacy of the artistic imagination. Disguising politics makes sense, therefore, especially in a nation whose literary tastes tend toward narratives of individual struggle. If the response of the students in my World Literature survey is any indication, this strategy worked. Eagerly discussing the novel’s concerns with race and gender, U.S. imperialism and the Trujillo regime, these students derided as “boring” and “preachy” the notion of a more overtly political novel. For these readers,

and presumably the many others who read this best-selling novel, along with much of the literary establishment (it won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award and was named *Time* magazine's book of the year), Díaz's strategy was successful.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, such attempts to sneak politics into a novel by writerly sleight-of-hand can be effective, but they risk distorting the politics and history an author like Díaz seeks to document. This essay, then, will investigate the extent to which Díaz's aesthetic in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* enhances his depiction of the horrific aftermath of the Trujillo regime. And it will examine the politics of this seemingly non-political political novel.

Díaz engages his readers through the comic exploits of his title character, the dark-skinned, obese Dominican sci-fi nerd and everlasting virgin Oscar Wao (née Oscar de León), as told by his onetime college roommate and sister Lola's ex-boyfriend, Yunior. The novel begins with a discourse on European and U.S. imperialism in Hispaniola and on the reign of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, whom Díaz identifies as "one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators" (2, n. 1). Díaz details this political and historical content without seeming to be political through the use of the mocking and self-aware voice of his narrator, Yunior:

A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror. (2, n. 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Some reviewers recognized the novel's focus on politics, on the legacy of Trujillo. But many others discounted or overlooked it. Thus in a front page review in the *New York Times Book Review*, A.O. Scott, barely acknowledging the book's politics, defines it as "a novel of assimilation, a fractured chronicle of the ambivalent, inexorable movement of the children of immigrants toward the American middle class." In *Salon.com*, Roland Kelts writes, "the novel finally reads most powerfully as [a] coming-of-middle-age story, with its minor keys of loss, self-betrayal and regret." Michelle Kakutani in the *New York Times* notes its politics as merely one of the novel's many concerns: "*Brief Wondrous Life* is, at once, a coming-of-age story; a family portrait; a meditation on the violent legacy of the Trujillo era of the Dominican Republic; a pop-culture, postmodern reflection on the fragmentation of history; and a haunting story about the allure and disappointments of the American dream."

Díaz tells us that Trujillo amassed a fortune through national monopolies, created one of the largest militaries in the Western hemisphere, and perpetrated a slaughter of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans—all while receiving U.S. support. There seems little hidden in this catalog of atrocity and exploitation. Díaz makes this overt historicizing less polemical through the voice of the narrator Yuniór, with its mockery and profanity and pop culture allusions and street slang and Spanglish. For instance, after comparing Trujillo to several fantasy villains, Yuniór says that “not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up,” that he had “ill monopolies,” that the “dude had bomber wings, for fuck’s sake” (2, n. 1). Yuniór tells us this in a footnote, a technique Díaz uses throughout to present historical and cultural information while satirizing academic historiography—in other words, writing politics while mocking the writing of politics.<sup>2</sup>

However, even with its ironic tone, this detailed rendering of the DR’s political economy and moving depiction of its human costs seems of a different register than the cartoonish story of Oscar. As A. O. Scott notes, “The incongruity between Oscar’s circumstances and his background...is the real subject of [the novel].” So one must ask what ties these two parts together, what connects Oscar’s broadly comic, pop-culture-filled story to Trujillo’s brutal repression? Oscar is connected to this past in two ways. One, his life was shaped by a mother, Hypatía Belicia (“Beli”) Cabral, who was a victim of Trujillo. Thus, through Oscar, Díaz shows the long-term, cross-generational effects of authoritarian rule. Two, Oscar’s preoccupation with dark fantasy (and Yuniór’s repeated allusions to the same) is Díaz’s principal method of connecting his readers to the horrors of the Trujillo years.

## 1

To explain how Oscar de León becomes Oscar Wao social misfit, Yuniór details Beli’s life in the DR, emphasizing the country’s racial ethos,

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the footnote in English language fiction can be traced to Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Because of its capacity for digression, its usefulness in metacommentary, and its ability to feign authority, the footnote has become an important feature in the works of several contemporary American writers, including Nicholson Baker, Dave Eggers, Tim O’Brien, and, especially, David Foster Wallace.

its equating light skin with wealth and beauty, dark skin with poverty and ugliness, which had originated in the DR's defining itself in opposition to the black slave culture of Haiti.<sup>3</sup> Trujillo, who tried to hide his own mulatto origins and who even lightened his skin with face powder, accepted and promoted these racist beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Orphaned in 1946, after her father Ableard was imprisoned by Trujillo and her mother Soccoro committed suicide, Beli was abandoned by her relatives because of her dark skin: "she was so dark no one on Abelard's side of the family would take her...and no one outside of the family wanted the darkchild to live" (252).<sup>5</sup> After being sold into servitude, she was horribly burned by "the father, who was not her father, splash[ing] a pan of hot oil on her naked back" (255), leaving a physical scar which corresponds with her substantial psychological scarring. At last, in 1959, rescued by her father's cousin, La Inca, Beli was admitted into one of the best schools in Bani, "a tony school where the majority of the pupils were the whiteskinned children of the regime's top ladronoazos" (82-3). La Inca's best intentions notwithstanding, Beli suffered in school, was ridiculed and isolated because of her dark skin—and because of her ignorance, an ignorance born of childhood deprivation: "During her Lost Years there had been no education of any kind, and that gap had taken a toll on her neural pathways" (84-5). Beli, abandoned, enslaved, scarred, isolated, and intellectually stunted, represents one of the many unknown

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Krohn-Hansen gives some background on racism in the DR: "Dominicans, faced with the inescapable fact that their republic shares the island Hispaniola with Haiti, have built barriers of prejudice and racism to be able to distance themselves both from their own African roots and from their "barbarian," dark-skinned neighbors. The country has a history of constructing its national identity in relation to Haiti" (*Political* 31-2).

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Derby identifies some of the ways Trujillo tried to disguise his racial identity: "He used pancake makeup and had his photos retouched to make him appear lighter-skinned; he frequently sought to frame himself as white by ensuring that the elite military (such as the Guardia Blanca) surrounding him on presidential visits were white... Sycophantic minions also developed a fictitious noble Spanish lineage for him. And he often tried to establish close proximity to things American" (197).

<sup>5</sup> The names of Beli's parents suggest their vulnerability and prefigure their fates—Abelard, of course, refers to the castrated medieval scholar of the same name and Soccorro to the word "help." The use of the compound noun "darkchild" to describe Beli serves two purposes: to emphasize this child's otherness and to continue the narrative's fantasy and scifi conceits, especially these genres' preoccupation with darkness.

victims of Trujillo's repression, a child lost in the wake of authoritarian violence.

Only upon sexual maturity did Beli escape being the kind of social pariah her son would become. Her ample physical charms gave her, for the first time, the power to exert her will, to seduce Jack Pujols, "the school's handsomest (read: whitest) boy" (89). In Dominican culture, a woman—especially a darkskinned outcast like Beli—had almost no other way to express her power. As Díaz explains, "the undeniable concreteness of her desirability...was, in its own way, Power...[Beli] finally had power and a true sense of self" (94). Of course, this was a false sense of self since it was based wholly on physical appearance, on sexual attraction, and thus did not command respect: Jack showed her no emotional intimacy and falsely promised marriage. When their affair was discovered, he and his rich family blamed Beli, who at the same time learned Jack had all the while been engaged to the daughter of another powerful family. Jack's mistake, Yúnior tells us, was not that he had had sex with Beli but that he had been indiscrete: "The fucking of poor prietas was considered standard operating procedure for elites just as long as it was kept on the do-lo, what is elsewhere called the Strom Thurmond Maneuver" (100).

Beli's next affair was with one of Trujillo's thugs, "The Gangster," who allegedly "slew [the exiled Dominican labor organizer and leader of the Popular Socialist Party] Mauricio Báez in Havana in 1950" (120). Once again, her sexuality gave Beli a sense of power (and rewarded her materially) but did not provide her with what she most desired: "a chance to be *in* love and to be loved back" (126). The Gangster was approximately twenty years older than Beli and much more worldly; he was genuinely fond of her (or as fond of a teen-aged girl as a middle-aged man can be who is "attempt[ing] to regenerate himself through the alchemy of young pussy" [123]). Yet for Beli this relationship was enthralling. The Gangster made her feel beautiful and wanted and safe. "*For the first time,*" Beli says, "*I actually felt like I owned my skin, like it was me and I was it*" (127). The color of her skin and the presence of her scars, those racial and class markers of beauty and self-worth, no longer made her feel ugly. Likewise, when she learned she was pregnant, Beli was ecstatic: "this was it. The

magic she'd been waiting for. She placed her hand on her flat stomach and heard the wedding bells loud and clear, saw in her mind's eye the house that had been promised" (136). Unfortunately, like Jack Pujols, The Gangster deceived her. While making promises about their future, he was married to Trujillo's sister. It is she who forces Beli to abort her child, to be beaten nearly to death, and to flee to the U.S. soon after Trujillo's assassination.<sup>6</sup> No matter when—in her childhood, her high school romance or her relationship with the Gangster—Beli is abused, denied a sense of self-worth, and abandoned by a Dominican culture whose racism, class stratification, and brutalization of women were reinforced by the repressive Trujillo regime.

The third man in her life, Oscar's and Lola's father, a drug addict who abandoned his family after only two years, is only briefly referred to in the novel, suggesting that by the time of her marriage Beli had just about given up on love. Not only had she stopped seeking love, but she had lost the ability to express it. Her abusive background made her incapable of experiencing emotional intimacy with her children, which in turn caused them to seek what Díaz describes as the "pure uncut unadulterated love, the Holy Grail that would so bedevil [them] throughout their lives" (125-6). In desperately seeking a genuine, intimate human connection, Lola and Oscar, although years and many miles distant from, are themselves victims of the Trujillo regime. We see in them both the long-lasting consequences of and the difficult struggle to overcome a system of racial and gender oppression and political violence.

Raised in a household forever at war, with a coldly domineering mother and rebellious sister, alienated from both Dominican and U.S. culture, Oscar sought refuge in the flotsam of fantasy he encountered in early 1970s popular culture, what Díaz labels "the dawn of the Nerd Age"

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<sup>6</sup>In having Beli escape to the U.S. after Trujillo's assassination, Díaz is true to the historical record: "little migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States occurred during the Trujillo era because of the nature of the police state and strict control over exit visas. The number of Dominicans who legally entered the United States from 1953 to 1960 averaged only about nine hundred per year" (Atkins and Wilson 91).

(23 n. 6).<sup>7</sup> In particular, Oscar tried to escape Dominican culture's masculine ideal. As a seven-year-old boy, he had been praised for having two girlfriends at once: "his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike" (11). But this moment is an exception in Oscar's life, this praise unique. Oscar will remain loveless, will desperately seek women, will painfully fall in love, will repeatedly and excruciatingly have his heart broken.

Oscar's social dysfunction is the product of a male-dominated culture that encouraged machismo, which was further encouraged by Trujillo's fashioning of a hypermasculine identity.<sup>8</sup> A specific formulation of machismo—the *tiguere*—was very much a product of this time and place. As Lipe Collado explains, "both the word *tiguere* and the person existed and were in popular usage at the beginning of the Trujillo tyranny, at the beginning of the 1930s. (...) [I]n the 1940s and 1950s...a 'culture of the *tiguere*' seemed to reign, a culture which then served as a model at the national level" (qtd. in Krohn-Hansen, "Masculinity" 125). The *tiguere*, according to Derby, was "the mythic paragon of barrio masculinity who gains power—riches, women, control over others—apparently from nothing" (185); he was "the classic dissimulator, someone who gains access to a station above his own through dressing for the part, through the appropriate style, but also through being bold, a smooth talker, and having a 'predatory masculine' presence" (Derby 186). Trujillo, obsessed with his appearance, having sex with countless women, and rising from poverty to the head of his country, provided the leading example of a *tiguere*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Within one eight page section of the novel, for instance, Díaz alludes to the TV shows *Star Trek*, *Land of the Lost*, and *Ultraman*; the movies *Star Wars* and *The Planet of the Apes*; the cartoons *Herculoids* and *Space Ghost*; the characters Tom Swift, the Watcher, and Doc Savage; the writers Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, Lloyd Alexander, Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov, Ben Bova, Robert Heinlein, E.E. "Doc" Smith, and Olaf Stapledon (13-21).

<sup>8</sup> Others have made this point. For instance, Paul Jay writes of "the pressures on Oscar as a young Dominican man to models of masculinity rooted in Trujillo's world" (181), while Ignacio López-Calvo writes that "the Dominican men in the novel are all unfaithful machos, who often take pride in this demeanor, until we reach the quintessential super-macho of them all: Trujillo" (76-77).

<sup>9</sup> While Trujillo embodied many of the traits of the *tiguere* and while this model of masculinity was thus promoted by the regime, the *tiguere* also served those who opposed Trujillo. Krohn-Hansen explains: "those groups in the capital who first created the image consisted of ordinary men who felt oppressed by the

Allegedly, Trujillo began his career as “a hoodlum, cattle-rustler, procurer, forger, torturer and murderer” (Wiarda 28). Snubbed by the upper classes, even after becoming army chief of staff, he gained partial acceptance after a second marriage into an upper class family (Wiarda 29-30). The Gangster’s trajectory mirrors Trujillo’s. The Gangster was born in an agricultural and fishing town to a milkman father; Trujillo grew up in a poor agricultural village with a father who worked as a postal clerk (Wiarda 26). The Gangster, like Trujillo, was clever and industrious: he was a poor, “scrawny, unremarkable boy [who] had shown a resourcefulness and fearlessness beyond his years” (119). Also like Trujillo, the Gangster succeeded through a life of crime—as forger, thief, extortionist, money launderer, and brothel owner (120-21).<sup>10</sup> In keeping with Trujillo (and the tiguere ideal he embodies), the Gangster was a sharp dresser, buying a new suit and four pairs of shoes with the money he earned from his first assassination (120). And like Trujillo, the Gangster used his womanizing skills to climb the social ladder, seducing and marrying the much older sister of Trujillo, just as he later seduced Beli: he “romanced the girl...chipped at her reservation with cool aplomb and unself-conscious cursí-ness” (124).

The epitome of the tiguere was the legendary Porfirio Rubirosa, who, as an international playboy, became a touchstone of masculinity for a generation of Dominicans. Díaz details the salient features of Rubi’s life: “A part-time former model and dashing man-about-town, Rubirosa famously married Trujillo’s daughter Flor de Oro. (...) Rubi was the original Dominican Player, fucked all sorts of women—Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke (who happened to be the richest woman in the world), the French actress Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor—to name but a few” (12, n. 4). Not surprisingly, when Beli fondly recalls the seven-year old Oscar’s triumph of having two girlfriends, she declares him “our little Porfirio Rubirosa” (12). But after this initial triumph, Oscar is the antithesis of the tiguere, is the

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Trujillo state. They shaped the male who came to be called ‘the tiguere’ in response to, perhaps as a resistance to, the dictatorship with its patronage structure, marginalization forms, and arbitrary use of force” (“Masculinity” 148-9).

<sup>10</sup> It’s no surprise that the Gangster was involved in prostitution since, according to Valentina Peguero, “Trujillo used prostitution to keep soldiers happy in isolated posts. In addition, brothels served as places to gather information for intelligence purposes” (84).



anti-Rubirosa. First, Oscar was not a smooth talker; he did not have “game” (other than Dungeons & Dragons). As Yunior explains, “this is a Dominican kid...dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands” (24), but “Oscar’s idea of G was to talk about role-playing games! ...he informed some hot morena, If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen in Charisma!” (174). Second, Oscar did not have the look of a Latin playboy: “He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his ‘anti-pussy devices’...sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded” (20). Third, Oscar was neither strong nor self-confident: “he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies” (15). Fourth, Oscar was no tiguere dissimulator; instead, he could not help being true to himself, however much it cost him in lost opportunities at love. Fifth, Oscar had no “predatory” masculine presence but instead understood the connection between such predatory behavior and male violence: seeing women as objects to be used and discarded was a precondition to abusing them. Inevitably, because he lacks these macho signifiers, Oscar faces questions about his heterosexuality, is called a “mariconcito” (16) and a “little fag” (43).

If Oscar struggles in love because of his aversion to the male sexual ideal of the tiguere, Yunior struggles because of his attraction to it. Although not a thug like Trujillo and the Gangster, and although detailing experiences that take place thirty years after Trujillo’s murder, Yunior models his identity on a macho image drawn from the tiguere, one that continues to shape Dominican notions of male identity. According to Krohn-Hansen, “today, this image of masculinity is in the process of becoming a nationally hegemonic one, an image used by men and women across the country, and also abroad, even in order to answer the question ‘what does it mean to be Dominican?’” (“Masculinity” 127).<sup>11</sup> Thus, we first meet Yunior as, on the verge of being beaten up, he walks through the mean streets of New Brunswick, “Alone and on foot,” he explains, “Because I was

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<sup>11</sup> Díaz has acknowledged the persistence of the tiguere in Dominican culture, asserting that he himself “was not some *super-tiguere* [hustler] who learned to spell and got crazy lucky” (qtd. in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 895).

hard, thought I'd have no problem walking through the thicket of young guns I saw on the corner" (167).

Besides viewing himself as hard and street-wise, Yunior is a tiguereish playboy. He objectifies and exploits women, while struggling against this behavior. *Oscar Wao* can, in fact, be read as a novel of sexual politics and consciousness raising. Yunior struggles to but does not completely succeed in overcoming his macho roots, admitting at the end of the novel, "I have a wife I adore and who adores me . . . and sometimes we even make vague noises about having children. . . . I don't run around after girls anymore. Not much anyway" (326). Another way Yunior seems trapped by his macho roots is in his depictions of women, which seem to owe more to R. Crumb and Frank Frazetta than to verisimilitude: "she was La Tetúa Suprema: her tetas were globes so implausibly titanic they . . . drove every straight male in their vicinity to reevaluate his sorry life. . . . And what about that supersonic culo that could tear words right out of niggers' mouths, pull windows from out their motherfuckng frames?" (92); "bitch was almost six feet tall and no tetas at all. . . . Like two girls in one: the skinniest upperbody married to a pair of Cadillac hips and ill donkey" (168). Such sexist depictions are understandable coming from Yunior. But some might argue that Díaz here has it both ways—criticizing the macho objectification of women while objectifying them.

In his struggle to overthrow traditional macho beliefs, Yunior is aided by Lola and Oscar. Lola is a strong, independent woman who does not tolerate his adulteries and casual sexism. Her strength derives from her conflict with her mother, whose strength and obstinacy in turn derive from her struggles against the racial and gender and class violence promoted by the Trujillo regime. Oscar provides Yunior with a counter to the tiguere model. While Oscar in his loneliness and desperation and social dysfunction does not seem an obvious role model, he does have characteristics that Yunior admires and learns from. He is true to his principles, regardless of how much these cause him to suffer, unlike Yunior, who is willing to tell any falsehood to get laid. He admires women and believes in romantic love, unlike Yunior, who sees women as objects to be manipulated and whose experiences have made him jaded about the

possibility of love. And, ultimately, Oscar is heroic, sacrificing himself to protect the woman he loves and to end the curse inflicted upon his family, unlike Yuniór, whose heroism is mere posing. Yuniór writes this story to honor Oscar's heroism, to continue his legacy, to try to thwart the curse, and to teach himself to overcome his macho ways. Díaz presents, disguised as comic farce, a political tale about the power of dictatorship, about how the authoritarian use of violence and terror can shape cultural beliefs and dominate lives decades afterwards. For Díaz, writing and remembering can transform even such deeply rooted cultural behaviors and beliefs. He shows how masculinities are constructed by history and ideology and suggests that a legacy of violence and oppression can begin to be undone by an empathetic and creative imagination.

## 2

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* opens with two epigraphs. The first, from Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner 'Flight,'" alerts the reader both to Díaz's concern with Caribbean racial identity and his conjoining of dialect and sophisticated aesthetic. The second comes from a less esteemed source:

"Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to Galactus?"  
*Fantastic Four*  
 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby  
 (Vol. 1, No. 49, April 1966)

This epigraph initiates the novel's use of comic book/sci fi/pop cultural allusions to depict the horrors of the Trujillo regime. Together, these epigraphs serve as a template for the novel to come—a serious political work hidden within a mocking, pop culture-suffused text.

Díaz links the outsized figure of Galactus, arch-enemy of the *Fantastic Four* and devourer of worlds, to Trujillo. The brief, nameless lives that are of no import to Galactus are, of course, Beli, Lola, Oscar—and Trujillo's many other victims. This linking of Trujillo to a larger-than-life super-villain is meant to convey both his outsized cruelty and his outré character. Trujillo ruled the DR for thirty years with almost unprecedented authoritarian control, what Adam Lifshey describes as "one of the most hermetically tyrannical states in the history of Latin America" (435).

“Trujillo ran one of the tightest dictatorships the world has ever seen,” assert Wiarda and Kryzanek, “The web of controls included military might, political and governmental absolutism, economic monopoly, thought control, education and intellectual conformity, systematic terror and control over all socioeconomic groups” (37). For the political scientists Houchang Chehabi and Juan Linz, this authoritarianism was so defined by Trujillo’s own idiosyncrasies and self-interest that it demanded a new name, “sultanistic,” a system in which “The ruler exercises his power without restraint, at his own discretion and above all unencumbered by rules or by any commitment to an ideology or value system” (7). Or as Díaz puts it, “Trujillo [was]...the Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated” (80).

A depiction of Trujillo, therefore, almost demands an epic figure. But Trujillo was also a buffonish megalomaniac, or in Eric Paul Roorda’s words, he was “simultaneously malevolent and ludicrous” (233). In appearance alone, Trujillo was ridiculous. “His passion for medals,” Derby writes,

earned him the sobriquet *chapita* (bottle cap). . . . He preferred his photographic portraits and busts to portray him with a chest full of medals, the more foreign and flashier the better... He both fashioned and signed into law the extraordinary uniform which he wore on solemn occasions: a Napoleonic bicorn hat, with two canes and white gloves. It had real gold trim from hat to shoes and weighed a full twelve kilos (over twenty-six pounds). (194)

Such a larger-than-life presence and absurd self-aggrandizement, tied to crushing repression and cruelty, raise problems for literary representation. How does one accurately depict a character both criminal and clown? Díaz’s solution is to combine historical documentation with comic book villainy—since a realistic depiction would not capture Trujillo’s grandiosity, while a farcical one risks undermining his regime’s brutality. Díaz keeps Trujillo himself at arm’s length; he barely appears in the narrative proper while remaining a distant, looming presence through most of the novel.

Why this oblique presentation? Perhaps Díaz is intimidated by Mario Vargas Llosa’s depiction of Trujillo.<sup>12</sup> Or perhaps this distancing is

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<sup>12</sup> Díaz seems particularly anxious about the influence of Vargas Llosa: he has Yunió criticize him for depicting Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo’s successor, “as a sympathetic character” (90, n. 9) and he declares that “The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the island... So common that Mario

meant to replicate the average person's relationship to power: we know our leaders through news reports and cultural representations and historical reconstructions. Also, a depiction of Trujillo in the vein of Vargas Llosa, however imaginative and psychologically astute, will always have about it a sense of artifice—more bravura literary performance than precise historical rendering. Ultimately, Díaz is interested not in Trujillo himself but in his persistence within the Dominican cultural imaginary. Even while he lived, Trujillo for most Dominicans was a distant and mythic figure, a face on currency, a military commander in newsreels, a name whispered in fear. Through his control of the media and the educational system, Trujillo became a godlike figure. According to Wiarda, Trujillo “presented himself as a superior being, one who was immortal, a chosen instrument of God with a great and noble mission to perform” (137). Since his death, it's the mythic proportions of Trujillo that remain, a ghostly presence that haunts the island in rumor and legend and repressed cultural memories: “After a time, the domestic population became used to the ritual of offering adulation to Trujillo...he built up a cult or mystique about his personage, and there is little doubt that after a generation of this kind of indoctrination many Dominicans accepted and believed the myth” (Wiarda 137).<sup>13</sup> Trujillo exists in the novel as he, to some degree, persists in contemporary Dominican culture—a name and a cartoonish figure whose actions continue to darkly reverberate.

Beginning with his reference to Galactus, Díaz relies on several fictional villains to convey Trujillo's evil. In the novel's opening pages, Yuniór declares Trujillo “our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid” (2, n. 2). Sauron is the Dark Lord of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. Arawn is an evil sorcerer in Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* series.

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Vargas Llosa didn't have to do much except open his mouth to sift it out of the air” (144). Likewise, he seems to accuse Julia Alvarez of romanticizing the reception of a poor student, in contrast to the way Beli was received: “It wasn't like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor scholarship student. No Miranda here: everybody shunned [Beli] (83).” (See Lopez-Calvo, 79-82, for more on *Oscar Wao* and the anxiety of influence in *Oscar Wao*.)

<sup>13</sup> One way Dominicans have sought to counter this historical mythologizing and erasure is through the Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance, which features instruments of torture and audio recordings of torture sessions, among other grisly relics (Archibald).

Darkseid is a super-villain in DC comics and an enemy of Superman. He is alluded to again in connection with the destruction of Beli's home and family by what Díaz labels Trujillo's "Omega Effect" (80), a deadly magical beam fired from Darkseid's eyes which "can teleport the target anywhere Darkseid chooses, erase the target from existence instantly and can then restore the target if he chooses. The Omega Effect is not limited to traveling in straight lines, [but is] able to bend or twist as needed" ("Darkseid"). Darkseid's supernatural powers and his unqualified evil ("he is obsessed with finding the Anti-Life equation in order to use it to rule the universe" ["Darkseid"]) correspond with the collective memory of Trujillo, Dominicans' perception of Trujillo as supernatural, as having nearly demonic abilities. "Many people," Díaz writes, "believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers! It was whispered that he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away" (226). For some Dominicans, according to Derby, Trujillo's power could only be understood as the result of black Haitians' connections to the elemental forces of nature: "Access to occult forces may provide an explanation of how one person can have much more authority than anyone else...through his grandmother Trujillo was known to have Haitian antecedents, which were used to explain his mystical access since Haiti is considered a superior center for 'black magic' in the Dominican imagination" (210-11). This preoccupation with Trujillo's blackness is further suggested by Díaz's references to *Darkseid* and to Sauron, who rules from the *Dark Tower*.

From this tower, Sauron exerts his will through the lidless Eye of Sauron.<sup>14</sup> Díaz uses this allusion repeatedly to convey the omnipresence of Trujillo's police state: "it was the Great Eye himself who granted the Gangster authority over a number of the Trujillo family's concessions" (121); "His Eye was everywhere; he had a Secret Police that out-Stasi'd the Stasi, that kept watch on everyone" (225); "Hiding your doe-eyed, large-breasted daughter from Trujillo . . . was anything but easy. (Like keeping the Ring from Sauron)" (217); "La Inca . . . knew that she could not protect

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, "the Eye" (the Red Eye, the Evil Eye, the Lidless Eye, the Great Eye) is the image most often associated with Sauron. Sauron's Orcs wear the symbol of the Eye on their helmets and shields and refer to him as the "Eye" because he does not allow his name to be written or spoken.

the girl against a direct assault from the Eye” (156). However, while his eye is present, Trujillo himself barely exists within the novel. Here Díaz follows the model of Sauron, whose physical appearance Tolkien leaves to the reader’s imagination. Repeatedly, Tolkien uses shadow imagery to convey Sauron’s spreading evil. For instance, he writes, “last night I told you of Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord. The rumours that you have heard are true: he has indeed arisen again. (...) That name even you hobbits have heard of, like a shadow on the borders of old stories. Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again” (50). Tolkien describes the Dark Tower as veiled in shadow, while Mordor, Sauron’s domain, means “land of shadow.” Díaz repeats this imagery, using Sauron’s association with shadows to convey the almost supernatural reach of Trujillo’s terror: “Neither of [Beli’s father’s] daughters had any idea, were as carefree as Hobbits, never guessing the Shadow that loomed on the horizon” (218-9); “it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people and the shadow of fear he cast throughout the region. Homeboy dominated Santo Domingo like it was his very own private Mordor” (224).

However compelling these allusions, they obscure the much more real and elaborate way Trujillo maintained his dictatorship. Nothing in the novel matches, both in explicitness and as an evocation of the banality of evil, one former sergeant’s description of Trujillo’s surveillance system:

It was controlled to an exceptional degree. (...) Every mayor...had to report to...the commander of the patrols, on whether some inhabitants of their rural section were missing. No one could transfer himself or herself even from one section to another without permission from the local commander, far less settle down in a different pueblo. If I went by a house that was closed, they had to tell me why that house was closed, where those who lived there were (qtd. in Krohn-Hansen, *Political* 180-81).

Trujillo ruled through a network of spies and police whose terror created pervasive paranoia and fear. Díaz briefly mentions that “at any one time between forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police’s payroll” (225-6). Yet the frequent reoccurrence of fantasy elements overwhelms such realistic asides. In keeping with the novel’s fantasy/supernatural concerns, these security forces seem less the

systematic presence described by the sergeant above and more a darkly comical *deus-ex-machina*. Here's how Díaz describes the two men—"two huge men with matching pompadours" (140)—who assault Beli: "The Elvises struck her in the head and back" (142); "Did you miss us? Elvis One asked, slapping cuffs on her wrist" (143). These Elvis references maintain the novel's comic book feel while associating the thugs with late 1950s machismo. However, in their almost Quentin Tarantinoish retro cool, such descriptions (along with other similar uses of pop culture in the novel) obscure the systemic nature of Trujillo's police state and reduce its horrors to farce. By contrast, Julia Alvarez in *In the Time of the Butterflies* repeatedly shows both the workings of this surveillance system and its impact on the island's population: "there had been the silence that always followed any compromising mention of the regime in public. One could never be sure who in a group might report what to the police. Every large household was said to have a servant on double payroll" (73); "It really scared me, him talking that way, *in public*, with guards all around and anybody a spy" (132); "our trusted Prieto has been reporting everything he hears in the Mirabal household down at Security for a bottle of rum and a couple of pesos" (129).

Examination of *In the Time of the Butterflies* highlights a surprising omission in *Oscar Wao*: the Catholic Church. While one might assume the Church to have been a dominant institution in the D.R., as it has been in most of Latin America, in actuality it lacked real power—due partly to the anti-clerical legacy of the French Revolution in Hispaniola and to the Haitian revolution in 1791—until Trujillo's rule. As Wiarda explains, "it was not until Trujillo came to power that the Church began to recover its power as an organized unit" (141). Trujillo helped the Church in many ways, providing financing for the building of churches, requiring Catholic instruction in public schools, declaring Catholicism the national religion, and granting the Church tax exempt status (Wiarda 142-4). One Archbishop gratefully wrote, "the Church in the Dominican Republic has reached a degree of splendor it had never known before. It owes its present favorable status to the Catholic-political genius of Generalissimo Dr. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina" (Ricardo Pittini qtd. in Wiarda 144). In



consideration of these favors, the Church did not officially oppose Trujillo until the last two years of his reign.<sup>15</sup> Its consistent and public praise of him did much to enhance Trujillo's reputation and strengthen his hold on power.

Unlike Díaz, Alvarez explicitly notes the Church's complicity, having Patria Mirabal say, "We all knew there were priests around who would report you to the SIM if you spoke against the regime" (154). Similarly, Minerva Mirabal complains that the "church will keep mum till kingdom come. (...) Not a peep to help the downtrodden" (158). But Alvarez also shows how some individual priests are radicalized (what she calls "the new militancy from the pulpit" [182]) by the violence they see inflicted upon the peasantry by Trujillo's forces. One priest declares, "We cannot remain indifferent to the grievous blows that have afflicted so many good Dominican homes. (...) All human beings are born with rights derived from God that no earthly power can take away" (206). Díaz mentions neither the Catholic Church's complicity with nor its opposition to Trujillo. The moral issues at stake here, perhaps, are too serious for Díaz's aesthetic. It's hard to reconcile Galactus with Graham Greene. Likewise, it's hard to imagine any character in Díaz's novel making, as Alvarez's priest does, such a straightforward declaration of human rights without its being immediately undercut by irony or derision.

Alvarez's novel is, in large part, the story of how the Mirabal sisters and those around them are politicized. The characters in Díaz's novel, however, experience no such political awakening. Beli's family was destroyed by Trujillo, her lover was an assassin for Trujillo, and she herself was beaten nearly to death at the behest of Trujillo's sister, yet she never mentions Trujillo or expresses outrage about the political roots of her traumatic past. Lola has something of a political consciousness: she rebels against her upbringing, gains a feminist perspective and sense of independence, and becomes involved in Latina politics at Rutgers. Yunió, too, who researches and documents Dominican history and who struggles

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<sup>15</sup> Wiarda attributes the Church's belated opposition to Trujillo in 1959 and 1960 to "The wave of indiscriminate terror unleashed following the 1959 invasion attempt...the jailing of many of the country's most prominent citizens, including a priest and three seminarians...and probably the realization that the regime would not last much longer" (164).

to overcome Dominican machismo, has some political consciousness. Oscar, obsessed with fantasy violence and villainy, never examines the history that shaped his mother and thus his own life, except to see it as the result of a long-standing curse, the Fuku. Yet in some ways Oscar resembles the stereotypical proletarian hero. Coming from a modest background and steadily abused by the dominant culture, he ultimately sacrifices himself to defend another victim of this system. However, Oscar's political awakening, if it can be called that, is generated by his loss of virginity, not by class solidarity. He fights against his lover Ybon's jealous police officer boyfriend, not a company thug. He identifies the cause of his and Dominicans' suffering as a long-standing curse, the Fuku, not class exploitation. However selfless, his sacrifice serves no larger purpose. The most overtly political character in the novel is a minor one, Archimedes, a student and political dissident and wannabe lover of Beli. Díaz makes him an object of ridicule: he hid in a closet and cried and used the fact that his life was in danger to try to seduce Beli. His fashionable appearance—he “had an immaculate head of hair and Héctor Lavoe glasses and the intensity of a South Beach dietician”—suggests the shallowness of his beliefs. Likewise, Díaz mocks his Marxism: “his most beloved ideologues were a couple of Gemans who never met a nigger they liked” (111). For a political novel, then, the characters are remarkably and consistently apolitical. Díaz goes out of his way to avoid what are perceived to be the limitations of novels in the proletarian literary tradition, with their radicalized and romanticized heroes and didactic conclusions.

One could argue that the political lesson this novel teaches is about the importance of bearing witness, of retaining historical memory through writing. In fact, despite its sometimes trivializing use of pop culture, its omissions, its depoliticized characters, and apolitical conclusion, *Oscar Wao* presents a detailed history of the Trujillo years and a compelling account of the consequences of authoritarian rule. In addition, as Anne Garland Mahler notes, writing itself is a target of Díaz's critique: “Díaz promotes a writing that does not repress its own inherent violence but rather exposes it in order to disarm tyrannical power of perhaps its most effective weapon: the written word” (120). Díaz himself argues that his use

of footnotes is meant to disarm tyranny, to create a double narrative that challenges the main text. “The footnotes,” he explains, “are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. [*The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*] is a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice” (qtd. in O’Rourke). Recognizing that “dictators are superb storytellers,” Díaz argues that “One of the dangers of this novel” is that “to fight [Trujillo’s storytelling power] the characters Oscar, Yunion, [and] Lola have to use the same tools, storytelling” (qtd. in Jay 190-91). And Díaz points out that Yunion attempts “to unlearn and expiate himself...in exactly the same way that the masculinity he’s trying to undermine has always perpetuated itself, by being the only voice speaking” (qtd. in Jay 190-91).

On this logic, only a multivocal, metafictional, indeterminate, and unresolved text can contest tyranny, while realistic narratives, because they impose a singular vision and an uncontested depiction of reality, reinforce tyranny. Authorship becomes authoritarianism. This notion that a traditional realist aesthetic is somehow complicit with tyranny seems wildly overstated. To raise an obvious objection: Trujillo and Díaz aren’t using the same tools; a dictator like Trujillo seeks to control all forms of expression other than his own propaganda, whereas an author, whatever his aesthetic, is writing one book which no one will be forced to read and which likely will barely be read at all. Its meaning and truthfulness are not imposed dictatorially but are shaped by readers and critics, by history and culture. On Díaz’s logic, the whole body of realist fiction could be read as reactionary because of its aesthetic, no matter its radical aims. And Díaz’s fear of the totalitarian power of words seems a sweet anachronism in a world where images so frequently overwhelm language and disarm rational argument.

Ultimately, the novel’s political and historical context is diminished by its juvenile and comic tone. No matter how much *Oscar Wao* teaches about the horrors of Trujillo, it remains a book about a fat virgin nerd trying to get laid. The novel’s last pages recount Oscar’s stay in the D.R. (his return to the site of his family’s trauma). As such, it offers Oscar the possibility of overcoming this personal and national trauma. But because this trauma has expressed itself in his geekiness, it can only be overcome

through Oscar's personal transformation. The nerd must become hero, must lose both weight and his virginity and confront the masculinist forces that warped his humanity. Thus, a novel that uses fantasy allusions to document real exploitation and suffering becomes, in the end, something of a fantasy itself. Oscar finds a middle-aged prostitute with a heart of gold willing to sleep with him. He stands up to her policeman/thug boyfriend and in so doing stands up to the violent male forces that have dominated the D.R. and destroyed his family. Díaz has Yunior record these events and present them to us in order to give Oscar's sacrifice greater meaning than just one nerd's fatal end. Oscar's fate changes Yunior, makes him more serious, moves him away from D.R. machismo, encourages him to study history, helps him become a better and deeper writer. Yunior, of course, is a proxy for Díaz's readers. Like him, we learn important lessons about history and sexual politics. Yet however much Díaz wants the novel to resonate beyond him, Oscar's story—like his fleshy presence—overwhelms all that surrounds him. In this novel, history-becomes-biography, the political becomes personal.

Central to Díaz's goal of being political without seeming political is what most critics identify as its defining feature, the voice of Yunior, a Generation Xish voice that, even during the most serious moments, retains its irony and snark. But far from distinctive, this voice marks *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao* as the product of an age cynical about revolution or anything that resembles an organized people's movement. The politics here are the dominant politics of our historical moment: skeptical, individualist, attitudinal. More than undermining conventional mimetic realism and its reliance on master narratives, the voice of Yunior reinforces the always irreverent sensibility of advertising and mass media and global consumer culture, a sensibility that is forever unserious and ahistorical, a sensibility that has no time for the obscure casualties of a nearly forgotten dictator on an insignificant island in the Caribbean.

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