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# Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Reflecting creatively in 1967 on the production of his novel *El señor presidente* (1946), Miguel Ángel Asturias creates an imaginary scenario in which the dictator declares to Asturias that he, not the novelist, is the real author of the novel because "toda dictadura es siempre una novela" ("every dictatorship is always a novel"; 470).<sup>1</sup> With this self-authorizing claim, the dictator wrests power from the author by declaring himself the supreme meaning-maker. While the dictator—or, more accurately, the dictatorship—trumps the novelist in Asturias's text, a footnote in Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) expounds: "Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like" (97n11). Much as Asturias's dictator sees the novelist as his competitor, Díaz's footnote recognizes the slippery similarities between dictators and writers: they are narrative makers and narrative controllers. Both the dictator and the novelist create metanarratives and produce meaning. They are fabulous inventors who can make the unbelievable believable. They both also control subjects and exercise their authority through words to dictate their subjects' or characters' actions and thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing a similitude between writers and dictators, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* grapples with how to circumnavigate authoritarianism—that is, the precarious link among authorship, authority, and authoritarianism. The novel plays on the tensions between the two definitions of dictate: on the one hand, to order or command authoritatively and absolutely and, on the other hand, to speak aloud words that are to be written down or transcribed. There are two types of competing dictators at the center of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: the political dictator (Rafael Trujillo) who rules over the subjects of his regime and the narrative dictator (Yunior) who retrospectively recounts the novel's events. As the primary narrator and storyteller, Yunior loosely functions as a dictator in both senses because he controls and orders representation and because he collects, writes down, and reshapes a plethora of oral stories that have been recounted to him.

Through the novel, Yunior chronicles the life of Oscar de León, an obese Dominican American growing up as a social outcast in New Jersey from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Oscar is obsessed with women and with what he calls the "more speculative genres" (43), meaning science fiction, fantasy, and comic books. The book's middle sections center on the lives of Oscar's mother Hypatía Belicia Cabral ("Beli") and his grandfather Abelard Cabral in the Dominican Republic under the dictatorship of Trujillo (1930-61). Yunior pieces together Abelard's, Beli's, and Oscar's lives through oral interviews, historical research, snooping in Oscar's journals, and a bit of imaginative re-creation. In doing so, he recounts the family's sufferings under a transgenerational cycle of violence: Abelard is imprisoned and tortured, purportedly for refusing to hand

over his beautiful eldest daughter for Trujillo's sexual pleasure; Beli is beaten nearly to death in a cane field for having an affair with the Gangster, the husband of Trujillo's sister; and Oscar is killed in a cane field for having an affair with the girlfriend of the capitán, a policeman in a post-dictatorship Dominican Republic.

Yunior opens the book's prologue by providing an origin story for the cursed fate of the de León-Cabral family:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fuku' americanus*, or more colloquially, *fuku'*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. . . . [I]t is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fuku'* on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be the *fuku'*'s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (1-2)

The *fuku'* serves as a local folk hermeneutic for reading relations of domination in the Americas more generally and in the novel specifically. The result of colonization, slavery, and the eradication of indigenous peoples, the *fuku'* “ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare,”

Yunior explains ominously. Under the more than thirty-year reign of the “dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina,” the *fuku'* “was real as shit” (2) and to this day continues to haunt “its children” across the Dominican diaspora. Interlocking Spanish colonialism, Trujillo's dictatorial regime, and Oscar's temporally and geographically distanced story, the *fuku'* operates as a symbolic chronotope for the time-space of domination that is continually regenerating and transforming. The *fuku'*—or the “*fuku'* americanity” as José David Saldívar appropriately terms it (125)—thus generates an intersectional analysis of dictatorship that inserts it within the *longue durée* of imperial domination in the Americas, which scholars have termed the coloniality of power.<sup>3</sup> The *fuku'* foundational fiction that Yunior narrates establishes a transamerican community through an act of imagined identification across forms of domination, spaces of (neo)colonial violence, and histories of subalternization. It also offers an explanatory paradigm for the novel's events based on a folk history of coloniality and the “Great American Doom” it engenders (Díaz 5).

Yunior imagines a way out of this New World curse of violent domination via another folk belief in the ability to ward off a curse, positing resistance to the *fuku'* as the novel's other central governing politic. He explains:

[A]nytime a *fuku'* reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers).

Zafa. . . .

Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell. (6-7)

Based on the Spanish verb *zafar* (“to release or escape from”), the novel represents

zafa as a form of protection that enacts a liberatory function through the oral word combined with the physical action. Yuniór transvaluates the power of the spoken word into the power of storytelling by envisioning the zafa as a speech act that occurs through his hand's narratorial act. That is, Yuniór imagines that writing "this book," the text of the novel he narrates, is a zafa, a counterspell, a transamerican counter-dictatorial act.

Yuniór takes a complex history of power hierarchies with dire structural, material, physical, and psychic effects and metaphorizes it as the fuku'; by creating a narrative encapsulation of oppressive power, he creates a way to respond through another metaphor: the zafa. The novel thus stages a conflict between the fuku' and the zafa, between domination and resistance. The two underlying symbolic organizing principles embody the dual signification of dictating as dominating (the fuku') and dictating as recounting or writing back (the zafa). Yuniór's self-proclaimed narrative zafa places him in competition with the novel's most salient incarnation of the fuku': the dictator Trujillo. Yuniór's capacity to produce a narrative zafa is predicated on his ability to be a Janus-like narrator, since his challenge is to critique dictatorial power without reproducing it in his own text. Yet due to "the decisive influence that the discourses of power have in constituting the discourses of resistance" (Moran~a, Dussel, and Ja'uregui 19n14), Yuniór is partially overdetermined by what he is critiquing. I argue that the novel mitigates this problematic formally. The novel's narrative structure successfully negotiates between being complicit with and resisting authoritarian discourses and structures of power.

The zafa in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, then, is not Yuniór's book per se but the narrative techniques and formal structures in the book that interrogate dictatorial power in its various sociohistorical manifestations. I focus in particular on how the zafa functions through the character-system and through modes of narration. I first explicate how the novel marginalizes and parodies the dictator and centralizes socially marginalized characters to challenge authoritarian power and hegemonic discourses. I then demonstrate that the novel mobilizes underground storytelling modes—specifically hearsay, footnotes, and silences—to represent and contest formally the dissemination and repression of information under and after dictatorship. Ultimately, I show that the novel's so-called zafa against oppressive domination is performed and enacted through the counterdictatorial form in which the story is told. I end by contextualizing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* within a set of Latina/o dictatorship novels and argue that they are collectively generating a Latina/o counter-dictatorial imaginary that offers an intersectional analysis of authoritarianism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism in the hemisphere.

### The Dictator as Minor Character

A fundamental component of the novel's zafa is the text's representation of Trujillo and his more than thirty-year dictatorship over the Dominican Republic. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the historical subject with the most power—the dictator Trujillo—is a minor, flat character whose representation

is mediated by the narrator Yuniór and the author DÍaz. The novel orders Trujillo as a minor character in the text's temporal and geographic crisscrossing and prevents him from focalizing the narrative. A dictator who is a minor character and who is represented by other characters seems oxymoronic because a subordinate narrative position runs counter to the dominant position a dictator occupies in the political structure. In order to understand the importance of the subordination of Trujillo within the novel's narrative structure, I start with the premise that the narrative structures that allocate space and focalize perspective in a novel are structures of power. In other words, the uneven distribution of characters and perspectives in a novel can be analyzed as a system of power hierarchies.

The paradigm of dictatorship has its structural basis in the one dictator against the many subjects of the regime, making the novelistic tension between one protagonist and many minor characters particularly significant in a novel about dictatorship. Alex Woloch cogently articulates the dialectics of narrative form and social power through an examination of the system of characterization. Woloch observes that novels are constructed around a "distributional matrix," meaning that "the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe" (13). He terms "character-space" the relationship between an individual character's personality and that character's position within a narrative structure, while "character-system" indicates the various arrangements of these character-spaces in a narrative's overall structure (14). The asymmetrical configuration of major round characters and minor flat characters in a novel, Woloch argues, "reflects actual structures of inequitable distribution" (31). A social configuration of hierarchies of power is realized in narrative form, which for Woloch is evident in the unequal distribution of attention to and the distorted stylistic representation of characters.

If we consider Woloch's work in terms of other novels about dictatorship, we notice that the dictator's character-space dominates the character-system of seminal novels like Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el supremo* (1975) and Gabriel GarcÍa Ma´rquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (1975). These novels' fictional worlds are organized around an anonymous dictator, and the narrative perspective and action are principally mediated through and constructed around the dictator, who is both primary protagonist and antagonist. This narrative structure centered on and through the dictator creates an inequitable distribution of power and voice similar to the hierarchy of power that exists under dictatorship. This argument does not assume that the dictator's position is stable or uncontested within these narratives (it certainly is contested); rather, it assumes that the dictator's positioning is important because formal structures differently limit or enable particular kinds of interrogations of power.

The tension between major and minor characters, then, crystallizes a real world socioeconomic tension at the socio-formal level of the novel in its organization and representation of characters. Yet what happens when sociopolitical and socioeconomic "structures of inequitable distribution" are not reproduced structurally within the text to reflect their actual structuring in the real world?

How do we understand power differentials in a novel such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that displaces the dictator from the center of the narrative and redistributes attention to those subjects at the bottom of the hierarchy or at the margins of power? By moving away from the Presidential Palace and outside of the dictator's head, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exchanges a dictator-centric character-system for a character-system centered on marginalized subjects. Díaz's novel thus alters the correlation in the character-system between character-space, socioeconomic status, and sociopolitical power. This modification of sociopolitical positions of power in the socio-formal character-system of the novel enables *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to interrogate the relations of domination enacted by the Trujillo regime.

Yunior's narratorial control over the dictator's representation and his manipulation of Trujillo's signification produce the text's critique of the Trujillo regime and its (transnational, transgenerational) specter in the present. Trujillo is an overwhelmingly absent presence, a kind of backstage character continually invoked and described but whose appearance onstage is extremely brief in relation to his overall manifestation in the narrative. In terms of the plot's fictional events (its story), Trujillo is a minor character who does not occupy much narrative space. Trujillo does not materialize as a character until page 221 of the 335-page novel; as a minor character, he only appears four brief times and in only two of these appearances does he actually speak. In contrast to his marginalization in the story and the character-system, Trujillo has a major and pervasive presence in the text's language, structure, and mode of narrating (its discourse). Less a fully realized fictional character than a symbol of dictatorial power and violence, Trujillo has an ominous, haunting presence. The omnipresent traces of his regime that run through the novel imitate the inescapable dominance of the *fuku'*, while the text *zafas* Trujillo through its discursive representation of the dictator.

Trujillo's construction in the novel's discourse occurs principally through Yunior's multitudinous, vivid, and often iconoclastic characterizations of him. The historical Trujillo acquired over one hundred honorific titles during his reign. Title granting was part of the regime's institutionalized pomp and its forging of a discourse of sanctified leadership, patriarchal protection, national unity, selfdetermination, and economic progress to legitimate itself.<sup>4</sup> Yunior signifies on these titles, creating an alternative set of titles for Trujillo. Yunior demeans him by calling him the "Failed Cattle Thief" (2n1, 214, 217), "Fuckface" (2n1, 155n19, 216), "Mr. Friday the Thirteenth" (225), and the "Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated" (80). Putting him down and parodying him with praise, Yunior draws on preexisting epithets such as "Your Excellency" (221, 233) and "Your Enormity" (222) and blasphemously employs Trujillo's nickname "El Jefe" throughout the novel. He satirically praises the Trujillo regime as "the first modern kleptocracy" (3n1), gesturing toward the vast amounts of wealth and lives stolen from the Dominican people. He even creates new and bilingually witty words to name Trujillo's abuses, deeming his regime, for example, "the world's first culocracy" (217). He hilariously mocks Trujillo as the "consummate culocrat" (154),<sup>5</sup> crowns him "Number-One Bellaco" (217) for his infamous rogue playboy

tactics, and scathingly condemns his sexual exploitation of women. The epithets construct Trujillo as a type and as a figure who metonymically stands in for both dictatorship and heteropatriarchal power, satirically positioning him as the first and best in a series of oppressive world leaders.

The accumulation of names and descriptions offers a set of alternative significations for the regime that highlights the regime's abuses instead of effacing them like Trujillo's actual epithets. Yuniór's *falta de respeto* ("lack of respect") for Trujillo deliberately breaks cultural and linguistic norms of respect for those in power at the same time that it fashions a resistant discursive repartee *vis-à-vis* heteropatriarchal dictatorship. The humorously biting wordplay—alongside the footnoted historical references and the overlaid fantasy and science fiction allusions—fashions a discourse about the leader and his regime that is subversively humorous and linguistically capacious. The many *zafadas de lengua* ("zafa-like slips of the tongue") that Yuniór uses freely and riotously throughout the novel destabilize rigidly controlled boundaries. Yuniór's creative ability to signify on and talk back to power with parodic irony and with total sincerity shapes the book's style, which uses humor as means of critical meaning-making and as a mode of relief from the weight of oppressive relations.

Doubly made minor in the narrative hierarchy of power, Trujillo is relegated to the position of a minor character in the novel's plot at the same time that he is minoritized as a footnote in the novel's structure. Comparing his representation in the footnotes and the main text, Trujillo is referenced more frequently and described more elaborately and at greater length in the footnotes. In fact, Trujillo is initially introduced to the reader in the novel's first and lengthy footnote; he, his "minions" (12), and the violence of his regime appear in threefourths of the novel's footnotes. The positioning of Trujillo within the footnotes literally lowers Trujillo on the page. This structural move mirrors the way in which Yuniór deflates Trujillo linguistically.

The overall structure of flatness and humorous minor-ness produces the novel's counter-dictatorial mode of narration. As a flat minor character, Trujillo is often the butt of the joke (he is, after all, a "culocrat") and the referent of Yuniór's parody and expletives. Abstracting from this reveals that Trujillo is an object of reference in the narrative, not an omniscient narrator or a major character who directly produces meaning. Meaning is mainly produced about him, not by him. This loss of narrative power runs counter to the definition Juan Carlos Garcí'a gives of the dictators represented in the Latin American novel: the dictator is "e'l que da ordenes y e'l que crea. Esto lo aproxima a un ser entidad todopoderoso" ("he who gives orders and he who creates. This approximates him to an all-powerful entity"; 27). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the dictator Trujillo does not create and order like an omnipotent being; rather, he is created by and ordered through Yuniór's descriptions. Because he is neither the origin of nor in control over the production of meaning and action in the text, Trujillo does not function as a dictator in the novel. Instead, he functions for the narrative discourse.<sup>6</sup> The novel formally counters, or *zafas*, Trujillo's power through its marginalization and functionalization of the dictator.

These narrative techniques also reinforce the novel's positioning of the dictatorship

within various interlocking modes of domination. The novel suggests that the perpetration of violence is not caused solely by Trujillo's authoritarian political regime but by the five-hundred-year *fuku' americanus*. This move first denies Trujillo the power of having a totalizing impact on the development of the story's events; second and more important, it turns Trujillo into a mediating figure of transhistorical modes of domination. Just as Trujillo is not an agent who directly produces meaning in the text, he is not the origin of oppression but one figure, though admittedly a very prominent and brutal one, whose rule upholds and extends the coloniality of power. A figure embedded in an entrenched structure of domination, the dictator is a crystallization of one violent epoch in a fivehundred-year transamerican saga. The novel thereby disavows the mistaken assumption that dictatorships are exceptional regimes and that subjects will be free once dictatorships are toppled.

Lola's condemnatory response to her brother's brutal murder over three decades after the death of Trujillo is perhaps the most telling and insightful analysis of power in the novel; "Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (324), she declares. Lola's denunciation implies that the responsibility for dictatorial relations of domination and social violence must be distributed more widely; responsibility must also be placed on the "ten million Trujillos" in the Dominican Republic and the United States. This allocation of accountability is reflected structurally in the novel's displacement of Trujillo within the overall character-system; its frequent denunciatory and expose'-like footnotes about high-ranking officials in the regime; its utilization of minor dictator characters like the Gangster, the *capita'n*, and even Yunior; and its multigenerational, transnational narrative arc. Moreover, Lola's use of Trujillo's name as a communal proper noun highlights how subjects are complicit in the systems of power that govern them. Her use of the shared *we* not only implicates everyone, including Lola herself, for internalizing oppression and perpetuating marginality, it also asserts that collective responsibility must be assumed, since a people—not a single figure of power—bear the blame for acts of domination, whether they are perpetrated by political or discursive regimes.

### A Marginalized Hero

The *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* frames its meditation on authoritarian power through Oscar de Leo'n, a marginalized and atypical Latino growing up in the United States after the Trujillo regime's official collapse. Tracing the *fuku' americanus* through the de Leo'n-Cabral family, the novel's structure suggests that understanding Oscar's life requires a transgenerational family story and a transamerican history, just as understanding Trujillo's reign requires remembering the colonial past and recognizing contemporary dictatorial relations. Based on the lives of subjects who are traditionally deemed too insignificant as well as too temporally and spatially removed from so-called major events, the novel positions Oscar's life at the social margins within a cyclical family history of violent subordination, making his marginalization a node through which various relations of domination overlap and are interrogated.



The cane field in which Beli nearly dies and Oscar does die serves as a chronotope for the family's experience of repression and as the time-space for the reenactment of intersecting oppressions. The cane field is a primal site where violence is perpetrated against African-origin subjects: slaves, Haitian laborers, Dominican subjects (Beli), and transnational subjects (Oscar). "[P]lunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane" (146), Beli is taken into the cane fields and "beat[en] . . . like she was a slave. Like she was a dog" (147). Beli's beating in 1962 establishes a similitude between physical repressions of African-origin subjects across time and space. Going back 180 years positions the cane field in approximately the year 1782, during the time of slavery and shortly before the first stirrings of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Slaves were subject to the condition Orlando Patterson describes as "social death" (38), which includes violent beatings, illiteracy, lack of control over sexuality, and the denial of parental and filial birth ties in what he terms "natal alienation" (5). It is not mere coincidence that Beli is a very dark-skinned Dominican woman who is nearly killed in a cane field for her romantic relationship, nor that she slips into "a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she'd not even had her own name . . . alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick, pretending that the scribble was letters, words, names" (148). Moreover, the scar that covers Beli's back, the result of the burning she receives living parentless in Outer Azua, is "as vast and inconsolable as a sea"; "her bra slung around her waist like a torn sail" (51) calls forth a slave ship in the Middle Passage. The novel does not imply that being subjected to slavery or economic servitude is the same as being subjected to dictatorship or heteropatriarchal domination, but it does establish intersectional resonances between the violence enacted on Beli, Oscar, and the slaves and laborers in the cane fields. Later, in 1995, when Oscar is beaten in the cane fields, the "world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had an overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago" (298). Ambiguous about precisely how long ago a "long time ago" is, the description evokes both his mother's experience and his enslaved ancestors' experiences.

This temporal ambiguity gestures toward the cyclical structure of events in the plot and the residual temporality of dictatorship. As Raymond Williams advises, "it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance" (121). To understand a present hegemony, Williams maintains, we cannot focus solely on its features in the present but must look at its ever-changing contours through a dynamic process-oriented analysis. Díaz's novel enacts such a contextualized analysis vis-à-vis its characterization of Oscar's post-Trujillo death, which highlights what Williams would call the "residual" (123) effects of slavery, colonialism, and dictatorship because elements produced in the past continue actively to impact the present. To invoke Karl Marx, the "circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past . . . [weigh] like a nightmare" (595) on Oscar's life. Oscar intuits this before his death, evident when, in relation to his own suicide attempt, he professes, "It was the curse that made me do it." Disavowing Oscar's interpretation, Yuniór exclaims, "I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit." Undaunted, Oscar retorts, "It's ours too" (194).

Inheriting his family's past and the bane of the *fuku'*, Oscar astutely recognizes that his life is overdetermined by the long history of colonization, imperialism, and dictatorship in the Americas.

Oscar's claim on the curse and the effects of its inheritance on him are also revealing in relation to his own position in the novel's character-system. Given the title and his status as the "hero" (11), Oscar is surprisingly absent for most of the novel. Oscar's absence, however, directly enables the presence of other family members; Lola, Beli, and Abelard become main characters.<sup>7</sup> The partition of character-space among various main characters in the family reinforces on the level of the character-system the transgenerational vision undergirding Oscar's claim.

Not only does Oscar's "brief" life become part of a series of lives that together trace transamerican relations of domination, but also his "wondrous" life as a marginalized and atypical hero becomes part and parcel of the novel's critique of dictatorial relations, whether political, social, or discursive. The novel uses Oscar's abnormality and his nonnormative body to challenge authoritarian power and normative discourses, drawing a link between both forms of domination. The novel introduces Oscar as a kind of aberrant Dominican male and thus an aberrant Dominican hero. The first chapter, "GhettoNerd at the End of the World, 1974-1987," begins:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how very un-Dominican of him). (11)

According to Yunió, as well as the conventions of Latino fiction, Oscar is not a typical Dominican American character or protagonist. His characterization as un-Dominican in the novel is tied to four main characteristics: sexuality, body type, race, and culture. As a nerdy, overweight, dark-skinned Afro-Latino fluent in the fantastic genres but illiterate in the game of sex, Oscar "[c]ouldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21), as he fails to be a "Normal" (that is, socially acceptable) Dominican male subject. Establishing difference and anomaly over norms and stereotypes, the novel begins by highlighting what Oscar is not and maintains this technique of exaggerating differences throughout.

Oscar's nonnormativity serves as a vehicle for the novel's interrogation of the norms, discourses, and hierarchies of power that dictate marginalization and oppression. Oscar's "extraordinary bod[y]" is located at the bottom of what Rosemarie Garland Thomson characterizes as "accepted hierarchies of embodiment" (7). Black, Latino, fat, effeminate, poor, and nerdy, Oscar is multiply marginalized. Relegated to the social and economic margins, he suffers ridicule and rejection throughout his life; yet in stark contrast to his social ostracism, Oscar is the novel's titular hero, and his life frames the novel. This privileged status calls into question both Oscar's social subalternization and the discourses that produce it.<sup>8</sup>

The novel centralizes the marginalized character of Oscar as a protagonist and

marginalizes the dictator as a minor character. The demotion of the figure of power—Trujillo—and the elevation of the figure of marginality—Oscar—work contrapuntally in structuring a critique of dictatorial power and the dictates of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Trujillo is figured as the excessive embodiment of traditional Dominican masculine sexuality, while Oscar is depicted as sorely inadequate according to these heteropatriarchal ideals. Trujillo is obsessed with whitening his skin, an indication of internalized racism, while Oscar is ridiculed for being a dark skinned Afro-Dominican who does not corporally embody the ideals of white supremacy. Using the latter extreme to interrogate the former extreme, the novel breaks down, or *zafas*, these hierarchies. Calling the dictatorial authority of the norm into question through the elevation and exaggeration of difference, Oscar's framing centrality is a key counter-dictatorial narrative strategy that works through characterization in the sense of both narrative description and distribution of attention.

Far from rejecting Oscar for being a “sci-fi-reading nerd” (19), the novel places Oscar and his beloved genres, which are traditionally considered low cultural forms, at the very center of its narrative stylistics. The novel harnesses the speculative and boundary-pushing genres of fantasy, science fiction, comic books, and marvelous realism to communicate the magnitude of dictatorial atrocities. The multi-generic modes of representation are epistemic as well as aesthetic, for they explore the hermeneutics used to comprehend absolute power. Each imaginative mode contributes one interpretive lens or set of critical references that differently decipher dictatorial political systems and authoritarian discourses in the Greater Caribbean. Oscar's nonnormativity and reading list contribute to his lifelong social marginalization, but when privileged within the novel, they serve instead as vehicles of critical interrogation.

### Underground Storytelling

The *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* also employs folk orality, paratextual footnotes, and blank pages to critique dictatorial relations. Subjects living under repressive regimes must either risk under-the-radar signifying and coded circumlocution or remain silent. Yunior mobilizes oral sources, footnotes, and silences to mimic the dissemination and repression of information under dictatorship and dictate a story against dictatorship without being dictatorial.

Yunior recounts his story through a wide variety of named and unnamed oral sources, thereby forging an oral, hearsay hermeneutic that functions as a narrative structuring principle and as a means of reading dictatorial power. Yunior's style of narration frequently reflects this oral transcription, highlighting how sources have dictated their stories to him and how he has pieced his narrative together out of the stories he has gathered. The novel's narrative construction is situated in an oral chain of communication through which the anonymous folk of the Dominican community tell their *fuku* “tales” (5), beginning on the novel's first page with what “[t]hey say” about the origin of their bane of domination. Phrases are interspersed throughout the text, signaling the narrative's embedment in orally circulating information. The novel's hearsay structure is subtle,

most heavily signaled through phrases indicating the secondhand acquisition of information: it was said, it was believed, there are those alive who claim, it was rumored, legend has it, and it was whispered.<sup>9</sup> These and other phrases appear alongside occasionally specified sources of information such as Beli, La Inca, Lola, Yuniór's mother, and Yuniór's girlfriend Leonie. Anonymous sources of information dominate the novel's vernacular aesthetics, and importantly, references to these sources appear most often in the sections that recount life under the Trujillo regime. Despite the fact that Yuniór is not present throughout most of Oscar's life and therefore has learned much of Oscar's life story secondhand—the same way in which he hears about Beli's and Abelard's lives—the Oscar sections rarely are narrated in a manner that foregrounds Yuniór's sources. In contrast, the sections set under the Trujillo regime rely on phrases that highlight how Yuniór has acquired information second- and thirdhand. Though Yuniór's style of narration has a generally first-person limited omniscient tone, his more frequent pauses to disclose the name of a source or signal an unnamed oral source in the sections of the novel set under Trujillo's regime imply that the events narrated during that period are much more pieced together than those sections that deal with Oscar's short life.

James C. Scott demonstrates cogently that “the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power” (xii); it therefore is essential to take seriously the contextual significance of the anonymous storytellers. This stylistic contrast is tied directly to the novel's representation of the effects of the conditions of dictatorship on the formal level of the text. Not by chance does Yuniór keep the opinions, hearsay, and versions of events he gathers at the level of anonymity (i.e., they say) and indirection (i.e., it was said). Such grammatical constructions, rendered in passive voice without specific attribution, protect sources' identities and register the dictatorship's effects on patterns of communication. Dominicans avoid direct speech and sometimes speaking at all because any dissent from or perceived discontent with the Trujillo regime could result in incarceration, torture, and even death. As Yuniór observes, “you could say a bad thing about El Jefe at eight-forty in the morning and before the clock struck ten you'd be in the Cuarenta having a cattleprod shoved up your ass. . . . Mad folks went out in that manner, betrayed by those they considered their panas, by members of their own families, by slips of the tongue” (225-26, emphasis added). This description of the network of informants and of the danger that results from expressing discontent reveals how Dominicans had to resort to coded narratives. Below the surface of the phrases marking oral history, the anonymous speakers' experiences of negotiating domination under this regime are present and continue to haunt their patterns of speech post-dictatorship.

The paratextual apparatus of the footnotes also symbolically concretizes in narrative form covert styles of communicating. Thirty-three footnotes of varying length run throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The book's main text is double-spaced, while the footnotes are single-spaced and printed in smaller font. Though the footnotes run the length of the novel, thirty of the thirty-three footnotes are found in the sections about Trujillo's regime.<sup>10</sup> As with the references

to a larger source community, the conglomeration of the footnotes in the sections set during the Trujillo regime takes on particular significance.

The footnotes are also important for discussing domination and narrative form because they play out power relations structurally within the text. As has been argued by critics who examine the paratext of the footnote in fictional novels, footnotes are, in their placement and form, “minor elements” (Jackson xv) that “are inherently marginal, not incorporated into the text but appended to it” (Benstock 204). Footnotes are located literally at the bottom of the page and structurally at the bottom of the textual hierarchy, below the main text and peripheral to the primary or dominant storyline. While footnotes are at the “margins of discourse,” as Shari Benstock characterizes them (220), their secondary relationship is complicated in Di’az’s novel because the subordinate footnotes are central to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The footnotes establish another set of commentaries and sequence of events that are below and subordinate to but also central to and constitutive of the main text.

Functioning as examples of what Scott calls “hidden transcript[s]” that enact “a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (xii), the footnotes evade the limitations imposed on narrative development much in the same way that a dissenting subject rhetorically evades and subverts power through indirection. As marginalia, the footnotes appear below the main narrative, visually resembling forms of undercover storytelling. That is, the footnotes structurally mimic the ways in which subaltern agents navigate repressive power by communicating information indirectly, secretly, and below the radar of the repressive regime’s gaze. The spatiality of the notational apparatus in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reproduces the asides and interruptions constitutive of oral narrative. For oral narratives do not strictly follow one single line of thought, often veering into associative connections and tangential narratives that build an interrelated network of details and sub-stories around the primary story. Similarly, Di’az’s footnotes contain digressions that provide important tangential information and generate other plot networks. This decenters the main narrative, which does not follow a single, direct line but explores multiple ones instead. To borrow Kevin Jackson’s captivating description, the footnotes “explod[e] upwards into the soft black-and-white underbelly of the main text on contact with the reader’s gaze” (140). The explosive and clandestine power of footnotes is heightened in a novel about dictatorship since dictatorship is intent on repressing subversive agency. The under-the-narrative footnotes in Di’az’s novel function like underground oral storytelling modes formally to critique dictatorial relations and dictatorial narratives.

The single-spaced footnotes and double-spaced main text also cause the novel’s structure to resemble that of an academic book. In traditional academic texts, footnotes establish authority, acting as the supportive and evidentiary structure. Yunion draws on the epistemic weight granted footnotes in scholarly convention to insert multiple kinds of sources into his fictional footnotes. The footnotes reference a report available at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (99n13) and cite historians, novelists, and even Yunion’s girlfriend (132n17) and mother (114n15), not to mention many science fiction and fantasy

texts. The footnotes do not privilege academic sources over personal, let alone fictional, ones and instead gesture toward multiple perspectives on Trujillo's reign, which is especially important given the univocal, monological nature of dictatorship. Serving as a creative mode of chronicling the Trujillo regime's abuses and as a "critical appendage" (Benstock 204), many of the footnotes expose the dictatorship's atrocities as well as interject a more extensive vision of oppression in the Americas. In the first footnote, Yuni6r gives a long list of Trujillo's "[o]utstanding accomplishments," designating the regime "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and argentinos are still appealing)" (3n1). The comical discourse of victory belies a serious articulation of the violence of the regime and the United States' collusion in supporting authoritarian regimes in the hemisphere. The first of many such footnotes, the aside provides a metanarrative that connects Dominican history to the history of Latin America and the United States, which is especially important given the geopolitics of knowledge production in the United States that subalternizes—or footnotes, so to speak—Latino American histories. Waging what Monica Hanna describes as a "historiographic battle royal," the footnotes forge an alternative "historiographic model[]" that imparts a critical hemispheric history of violence (504).

Such a history, though, must account for how conditions of domination create erasures that can never be fully recouped. The novel opens up the question of how to engage in historical recovery given the sometimes insurmountable challenges to recovering a violently repressed and disappeared past. The *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* materializes these absences textually in its narrative form. The many gaps and silences in the novel create a multileveled portrayal of the effects of dictatorial power on information networks and oral histories. Most evident through the trope of the "pa'gina[s] en blanco" (78, 90n9, 119, 149), Yuni6r cannot fill in the so-called blank pages due to a lack of complete information. Absent information is the result of several factors: it has simply not been recorded or spoken about; it has been repressed because people are afraid to speak or are silenced; it has been distorted because narratives about the past have been changed; it has been destroyed because the Trujillo regime burned the documents; and it has been lost because texts have disappeared. The novel generates a complex textual representation of silence through these blank spaces in circulating and noncirculating information.

Working in conjunction with the text's oral and footnote structures, the silences give formal shape and thematic space to the habitus of people living under the pressures of dictatorship and what Yuni6r calls the "Chivato Nation" (225). The field of dictatorship conditions a subject's linguistic habitus. By describing the nation as a chivato ("snitch") nation, the novel demonstrates that the Dominican people, functioning as a network of informants, enact and enforce the dictatorship. When Abelard, for example, talks with his best friend Marcus about his fear of following Trujillo's order for Abelard to bring his daughter to Trujillo, he "[w]axed indignant to Marcus for nearly an hour about the injustice,

about the hopelessness of it all (an amazing amount of circumlocution because he never once directly named who it was he was complaining about)” (229). Conditioned into silent deference to Trujillo, Abelard runs a grave risk with his under-the-radar signifying and coded circumlocution. This restrictive conditioning has long-term effects, evident in the “Source Wall” (149) that prevents Yuniór from acquiring accurate or complete information years later. As Yuniór explains, “Due partially to Beli’s silence on the matter and to other folks’ lingering unease when it comes to talking about the regime, info on the Gangster is fragmented” (119). Yuniór’s reliance on oral sources in the present is affected by the residual influence of the dictatorship on the production of contemporary oral stories. Impediment and fragmentation highlight how information has been distorted or erased and how the specter of dictatorship continues to shape the way survivors pass on oral histories.

In relation to what really causes Abelard’s imprisonment and the subsequent vanishing of all of his books and papers, Yuniór declares:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fuku’? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself. What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail—they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation. And it’s not like the fuku’ itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrals ain’t much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard’s imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more to say. Which is to say if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it. (243, emphasis added)

In “trawling” the past for information, Yuniór catches more silence than he does information. “[F]ull” access to and knowledge of what truly occurred in the past is impossible because people have been silenced and information has been disappeared. Yuniór explains that he relates “what I’ve managed to unearth and the rest you will have to wait for the day the pa’ginas en blanco finally speak” (119), keeping the integrity of the silences in his narrative. Ironically, though, the blank pages do speak. For they “stand[] monument” to the abusive horrors of the dictatorship, functioning as testifying silences. The novel simultaneously foregrounds these absent presences and provides a narrative space in which repressed stories can be dictated and chronicled in the archive of fiction.

Moving beyond silence into speech and text is, for the oppressed, a liberatory act, but that act must also recognize the silence within its own production. Neither author nor narrator can produce a story that lays claim to full and complete meaning because doing so would produce a dictatorial story. Having a story but not “a full story,” as Yuniór implies, is the most accurate and effective story one can have under dictatorship and against dictatorship. Creating a counterdictatorial narrative or a so-called *zafa* against domination, the novel suggests, necessitates a plurality of possibilities that is precisely impossible under dictatorship. For a dictatorship is univocal and does not allow multiple referents or traces of meaning to exist. It seeks to stabilize and control all meaning and action. In

fact, Abelard is imprisoned when his darkly comical signifying “trunk-joke” (234)—about there being no bodies in the trunk of his car as he tries to put a bureau in his trunk—is taken literally and distorted into a directly stated critique of Trujillo, as opposed to the indirectly implied reference it was. The Trujillo regime cuts down the double-layered ambiguity of Abelard’s statement, restricting what it signifies. In literary terms, dictatorships require an authoritarian narrative—that is, an authoritative narrative that is closed, controlled, and unitary, composed by an author whose word is sacrosanct and infallible.

Far from an objective observer in the positivist sense, far from omniscient in the narratorial sense, and far from panoptic in the disciplinarian and authoritarian sense, Yuniór foregrounds the knowledge that is both available and unavailable from his social location as he constructs his narrative *zafa*. By keeping meaning multivalent and by continually interrogating narrative authority, Yuniór dictates a narrative that is orally based but not authoritative. Yuniór draws attention to the absent, partial, and sometimes inaccurate information on which his narrative is built; this helps to explain his comments about the silence that “sphinxes” his “attempts at narrative reconstruction” (132) and his stated disregard for historical accuracy (132n17). Yuniór consistently foregrounds what he does not know, exclaiming “Who can say?” (22n6) and “shit, who can keep track of what’s true and what’s false in a country as baka’ as ours” (139), declaring to the reader “you’ll have to decide for yourself.” Offering uncertainty, silence, self-referential critiques, and a bit of humor as antidotes to dictatorial fixity, the text pointedly disavows certainty and definitive closure. The novel’s refusal to offer definitive explanations and its general destabilization of textual authority allow for multiple conclusions and generate multifarious readings as it refuses to fix interpretation or present an infallible account of events.<sup>11</sup> Rife with ambiguity, the novel dictates without dictating; that is, it tells a story without fixing that story monologically.

The open-endedness of meaning, which subverts the dictatorial desire for total control and fixity, exists all the way through the last page of the novel. Deceptively, the novel’s conclusion is not only in its last line—Oscar’s Conradian exclamation, “The beauty! The beauty!” (335)—but also in the panel Oscar repeatedly circles from Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986-87), which cautions, “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (331). Though the novel literally ends with the next and last chapter titled “The Final Letter,” nothing is truly resolved, for the *zafa* against the familial and hemispheric *fuku’ americanus* remains unfinished.

### The Latina/o Counter-Dictatorial Imaginary

Ultimately, Yuniór’s *zafa* fantasy of narrative justice does not offer a permanent resolution to the problem of dictatorship or the curse of coloniality. It is just a fantasy. For violence and impunity continue to overdetermine lives all over the Americas. Yet it is precisely the power of the imagination to express antiauthoritarian



longings that makes the dictatorship novel an enduring and compelling form and an apt generic tradition for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

The dictatorship novel is considered one of Latin America's oldest, most widely produced, and prominent genres.<sup>12</sup> Yet fully to understand the dictatorship novel, we must look beyond the geopolitical boundaries of Latin America as well as the linguistic boundaries of Spanish and follow the genre's forking paths into the United States and the English language productions of Latina/o writers such as Di'az. In the past two decades a new generation of US-based Caribbean, Central American, South American, and Mexican American authors have produced a wide range of novels in English about authoritarian regimes in Latin America rooted in US experiences of *latinidad*. We can thus contextualize Di'az's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* within an emerging corpus of Latina/o dictatorship novels. Consider, for example, Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992), Graciela Limón's *In Search of Bernabé* (1993), Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), Demetria Martí'nez's *Mother Tongue* (1994), Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* (1996), Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), Loida Maritza Pe'rez's *Geographies of Home* (1999), Sandra Benítez's *The Weight of All Things* (2001), Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005), Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* (2007), Sylvia Sellers-García's *When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep* (2007), and Cristina García's *King of Cuba* (2013). While these Latina/o dictatorship novels grapple with differing local and national histories—moving between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, Massachusetts and Guatemala, Chicago and Cuba, New Mexico and El Salvador, New York and Peru, among other sites—they are all haunted by the specter of authoritarian regimes.<sup>13</sup> Often the children of those who lived under and fled repressive regimes, many of the novels' characters (such as Oscar and Lola) and indeed the writers themselves (such as Di'az) have not directly experienced dictatorship. The novels give narrative space to second-generation perspectives as they grapple with dictatorships and the afterlives of these regimes in Latin America and the United States. The residues of authoritarian pasts thus mark Latina/o fiction across national origin groups, generating a pan-Latino and transamerican dictatorship novel tradition.<sup>14</sup>

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and its counterpart Latina/o dictatorship novels collectively reconceptualize dictatorial power by constructing intersectional analyses of authoritarianism, imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and racism in the hemisphere. Connecting and contesting various forms of power that dictate marginalization in the Americas, these novels construct what I term a Latina/o counter-dictatorial imaginary. The transamerican imaginary, as articulated by Paula M. L. Moya and Ramón Saldívar (2), is an experiential field through which authors imagine and forge transnational symbolic representations that serve as important forms of meaning-making. The novel is one expressive mode through which Latina/os imagine transnational identities and experiences marked by dictatorship; writers use fiction and its world-making possibilities to understand, and at times even reconfigure, political and discursive hierarchies of power in the Americas. By examining the politics of narrative strategies in *The*

Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao such as the demotion of Trujillo and the elevation of Oscar in the character-system as well as the imitation of underground storytelling modes, I have traced some of the formal contours of DÍ'az's counterdictatorial imaginary and analyzed how it functions formally as a counterdictatorial zafa.

As socially symbolic acts, Latina/o dictatorship novels such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* interrogate transnational modes of domination and attempt to imagine an ending to authoritarian power in its myriad configurations and manifestations. As Ramo'n Saldívar eloquently puts it with regard to what he terms its mode of "historical fantasy" (585), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "indicates desires for forms of social belonging that link the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart's fantastical aspirations for substantive justice, social, racial, poetic, or otherwise" (596). DÍ'az and his Latina/o counterparts are continuing the long tradition of dictatorship novels that fan the spark of hope for an end to authoritarianism, for the appearance of the disappeared in the archives of fiction and history, and for justice for the oppressed.

In thematizing and formalizing the process of critiquing and decolonizing relations of domination through the fuku'-zafa dialectic, DÍ'az's novel opens up a dialogue about how to rebuild, on both an individual and a communal level, in a post-dictatorship future haunted by past trauma and mired in persistent inequalities. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* dictates a story against dictatorship without dictating the successful ends of its critique. In this sense, the story must remain unfinished. For interrogation is a continual and necessary process as long as the coloniality of power, and the dictatorial structures and norms it perpetuates, remain. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, then, is not a completed zafa. Rather, it is a continuing process of zafa-ing.

#### Notes

1. This and all subsequent translations are mine.
2. Latin American novelists have frequently explored the relationship between narrative creation and dictatorial control by figuring the dictator as a writer. Chicano author Salvador Plascencia, in contrast, makes the writer a dictator in his novel *The People of Paper* (2005). The novel figures the writer as a dictator who omnipotently rules over his characters' life stories, omnisciently reads their thoughts, and materially profits from his novelistic representations of them. In rebellion, his fictional creations stage a coup against the author of the novel in which they appear, waging "one of the greatest wars against tyranny . . . a war against the future of this story" (46). The novel displaces political conflict onto symbolic terrain as the characters attempt to topple the author and dictator of their world.
3. According to scholars such as Jose' David Saldívar, Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Mari'a Lugones, modernity/coloniality is a world system that came into being in the sixteenth century during the colonization of the Americas. Coloniality, they argue, is constitutive of modernity and is its dark underside; Americanness is the form coloniality takes in the Americas. The coloniality of power enacts domination and exploitation through the creation and imposition

of hierarchical classifications of race, labor, and capitalist modes of production as well as gender relations.

4. See Lauren Derby and Ignacio Lo´pez-Calvo for insightful analyses of Rafael Trujillo’s titles and the “vernacular politics” (Derby 7) the regime used to justify its reign.

5. Culo means “ass” and the suffixes -cracy and -crat denote a form of government and a member of government respectively, so the humorous bilingual neologisms culocracy and culocrat (or “asscracy” and “asscrat”) indicate a regime ruled by hypermasculine sexuality.

6. Trujillo’s loss of power on a symbolic level is not equated with a total loss of political power because Trujillo’s presence is ever palpable and his regime permanently fractures the de Le´on-Cabral family. Rather, the novel takes away Trujillo’s power as the supreme narrative maker.

7. In fact, Lola’s narrative initiates both chapters that take place under Trujillo’s regime. As *La Inca* begins to reveal to Lola what happened to her mother and grandfather, Lola remarks, “She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin” (75). With these words, Lola’s narrative ends and the chapter about Beli’s life under Trujillo’s regime begins. Lola’s choice of words is important. She does not say, “I was waiting for her to begin” but “I was waiting to begin” (emphasis added) as if she herself will only begin as a subject with the story of her family history. Lola comes into being as a subject transgenerationally through connecting to her family’s past; like Oscar, she is moored to that past.

8. Elena Machado Sa´ez contends that Yunior is a dictator in the text because he narrates “a foundational fiction about Oscar’s progression from inauthentic diasporic male to an assimilated, unsentimental un-virgin” (538); Yunior thereby silences “Oscar’s points of queer Otherness” and suppresses hints of a “homosocial romance” between Yunior and Oscar (524). While Yunior the character certainly exhibits authoritarian tendencies as he criticizes and seeks to discipline Oscar into the prototypical Dominican male, I offer an alternate reading that instead foregrounds the formal features of the novel. I highlight Trujillo’s demoted and Oscar’s elevated positions within the novel’s character-system, and I contend that parody and exaggeration are key critical modes in the novel, whether they are used overtly to deflate and denigrate Trujillo or subtly to criticize Oscar’s social marginalization.

9. See examples of the varying uses of to say (1, 107, 111n14, 120n16, 154n19, 241, 251), to believe (3, 17, 83n7, 151n18, 226, 243, 245), to claim (139, 248), rumor (78, 91, 110n14, 120, 121, 145, 255, 266), legend (97n11, 155n19, 212n23), whisper (80, 226, 245), and secret (99n13, 217, 226, 245).

10. This includes the prologue, which deals heavily with the Trujillo regime. Only three footnotes are found in the sections dealing with Oscar’s life.

11. Anne Garland Mahler makes a related point in her reading of the text as a “superhero novel”: “[I]n acknowledging the repressive potential of writing itself, Di´az creates a superhero novel that is self-aware. . . . Di´az 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).

12. Latin Americanists consistently begin their genealogies of the tradition with Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's deeply influential work of creative nonfiction *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845), while early works such as José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851), Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Tirano banderas* (1926), Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor presidente* (1946), and Enrique Lafourcade's *La fiesta del rey Acab* (1959) helped shape the tradition until the mid-1970s, when the Boom generation of writers produced an iconic group of novels: Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el supremo* (1975), Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (1974), and Gabriel García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (1975). The tradition has flourished in subsequent decades, in particular due to the creative production of writers such as Luisa Valenzuela, Diamela Eltit, Cristina Peri Rossi, Ariel Dorfman, and Roberto Bolaño.

13. I use the term dictatorship novel instead of dictator novel to categorize these Latina/o texts because doing so moves the focus away from a single figure of power toward the various regimes of domination running through the fiction. There is no terminological consensus among Latin Americanists, but most critics use *la novela del dictador* ("the novel of the dictator") or *la novela de la dictadura* ("the novel of dictatorship"), though Carlos Pacheco prefers *la narrativa de la dictadura* ("the dictatorship narrative") and Julio Calvinó Iglesias employs *la novela del dictador y del poder personal* ("the dictator and personal power novel"). Of the critics publishing in English, López-Calvo uses the novel of the dictator, Roberto González Echevarría the dictator-book and the dictator-novel, and Raymond Leslie Williams the dictator novel and the novel of dictatorship.

14. Latin American scholarship on dictatorship novels and post-dictatorship aesthetic production has focused predominantly on a single nation or a particular region, in particular the Southern Cone, Hispaniola, and Central America. For example, Idelber Avelar, Macarena Gómez-Barris, Sophia A. McClennen, Diana Taylor, and Nelly Richard and Alberto Moreiras all focus on the Southern Cone (in particular on Chile and/or Argentina). Caribbean scholars such as Derby, López-Calvo, and Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Roy C. Boland Osegueda focus on the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Scholars such as Linda J. Craft, Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Ileana Rodríguez, and María Josefina Saldanña-Portillo focus on Central America (in particular, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and/or Guatemala). While Daynali Flores-Rodríguez points to English-language authors Díaz, Julia Alvarez, and Edwidge Danticat to argue that there is a "new novel of dictatorship" (91) in the Caribbean, I contend that reading Latina/o novels across different national and regional traditions reveals a broader Latina/o dictatorship novel tradition.

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