Stretching the Limits of Comfortable Intelligibilities:

Defying (Author)itarianisms in Junot Díaz's

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007)

Treball de Recerca Màster Construcció i Representació d'Identiats Culturals 2009-2010

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They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Taínos, 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. Fukú Americanus, or more colloquially, fukú -generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World.

—Yunior The Watcher, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Introduction

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is one of those cases in which critical acclaim and commercial success coincide and establish the author and his work as a major literary phenomenon. The main aim of this dissertation is to analyze Díaz's novel as a literary project that proposes, as a new and distinct feature within current literary scenes, a democratizing reading of history that allows a more politically critical assessment of the present. It is my intention to examine the aesthetic and discursive dimensions of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) in order to question degrees of sociopolitical and historical engagement within postmodern literary representations, and question the extent to which the novel's success is due to its clear political overtone or to its mastering of postmodern technicalities and its constant inclusion of references to and from popular culture. In order to do this, I will analyze the text's use of a wide range of postmodern techniques as aesthetic devices that seek to de-stabilize intelligibilities and thus question traditional concepts of authority and dispute the acceptance of authoritarianisms. This will allow my analysis to question the

reasons for using postmodern technicalities, elements and approaches in order to convey a message that is, in fact, a modern project rather than a postmodern one.

As a novel written by a black, Caribbean, Latino, Dominican-American[1] writer, I will take into consideration crucial identity issues involved in transnational experience and Diaspora. Similarly, and in relation to the negotiations of identities in a multicultural context, demonstrate the nature of the uniqueness of Junot Díaz's voice, which presents a novel about Dominicans with a clear intention to transcend both ethnicity and community reassertion. In this sense, I will try to demonstrate that Junot Díaz is not a "native informant," and that his novel does not aim at explicating Dominicanness to a white audience; instead, the novel addresses a broad readership in order to "inform" about the flaws of Eurocentric and heteronormative discourses.

I will also explore as to whether Díaz represents a distinct, singular voice or is instead a member of a group of emerging voices that seek to transcend the borders of their own communities in order to engage with universal, rather than local, preoccupations. This would be the case of traditionally called "minority" or "ethnic" writers who deal with issues of their communities with a critical perspective that allows them to escape celebrations and identity reassertion and concern with broader social and political questions. Among these we find writers such as Guatemalan Jewish American Francisco Goldman (*The Long Night of White Chickens*) and his re-evaluation of the bittersweet relations between the United

[1] In several interviews analyzed, Junot Díaz refers to himself according to different identity labels

States and Latin America; or Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*) and Johnathan Saffron Foer (*Everything is Illuminated*), whose looks into the past and traditions of the Jewish and Jewish American communities, have sought to transcend issues of Jewishness proper.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao was written between 1996, when Junot Díaz published his first work, *Drown,* a collection of short stories, and 2007. These were eleven years in which the world witnessed, through the emergence of international terrorism after 9/11, how the very foundations of Western capitalist civilization began to tremble. The international political strategies of the George W. Bush administration and the neo-conservative lobbies launched unprecedented acts of authoritarian violence such as the War on Terror, invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and other interventions in the Middle East that resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, starved, tortured, and mutilated in places such as Diwaniya, Kandahar, Kabul, Abhu Ghraib and Guantánamo. The world was no longer a "safe place," according to the Bush administration, which proceeded with a ruthless, implacable reaction to the "axis of evil." Suddenly, long gone (or not so) racist, essentializing discourses based on simplifying binary concepts of the self and the other re-emerged under an atmosphere of violent anger that claimed vengeance and called for a reenactment of the medieval crusades. Once again, information proved to be a powerful weapon, because critical voices were dismissed and/or repressed, and more than ever the media was broadcasting propaganda under the strict supervision of neo-conservatives.

Bearing in mind that this was the political situation in which Junot Díaz wrote *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it is my intention to question the extent to which the writing of the novel was influenced by the wounds left by unspeakable acts of violence against nameless children, women and men who were considered just numbers, collateral damage of "necessary" acts in order to "democratize" sovereign states. According to Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, these are the lives that do not have the right to grievability and cannot be mourned because they never existed and thus never died.

The analysis of the novel carried out by this dissertation clearly establishes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a deeply politicized novel that relentlessly seeks the complicities of the reader by informing and constantly demanding him/her to acknowledge the horrors of history. It is also the purpose of this dissertation to argue that behind a constant disruption of intelligibilities, which is conveyed by the multiplicity of voices and narrative levels, diverse linguistic registers and languages, lies a clear, solid political message that seems to promote the establishment of a community of politically aware and committed readers that re-engages with unquestionable universal values and democracy in an era that has lost faith in the "grand narratives." Through the analysis of the text's use and mastering of postmodern technicalities, and the "noise" of a systematic multiple-voiced narrative, I will try to demonstrate how Díaz is able to deliver a politically committed message of the denunciation of (author)itarianism and authority.

In order to approach such an eclectic and complex piece of work, an equally diverse theoretical approach has been necessary. Fredric Jameson and Linda

Hutcheon have provided insights about the political implications and potentiality of literary postmodernism. For a better comprehension of the novel's multifaceted narrative levels, Bakhtinian "heteroglossia" in his essay "Discourse in the novel" has been a fundamental theoretical tool. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* have been extremely enlightening in order to re-conceptualize the very concept of silence(s) and the way it/they is/are represented in the novel. Judith Butler's latest studies in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* have been extremely inspiring texts when approaching *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, helping me understand the importance of re-engaging with radical politics in order to assume global responsibility, as they lay bare the effects of violence on and the vulnerability of human bodies. Terry Eagleton's cultural materialist approach in *After Theory* about the state of affairs in current artistic representation and academia, has provided an extremely interesting analysis about the validity -now more than ever- of Marxist theories that re-examine labor and power relations in post-capitalist, postmodern Western societies. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the importance for this dissertation of long discussions held with its supervisor, Dr. Rodrigo Andrés González, about the need to find theoretical frameworks and critical readings that facilitate/question the undoing of subalternities.

Regarding the critical approach to the primary source, one of the most interesting challenges for this dissertation was the scarcity of specific academic work on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Due to its recent publication, much information about the novel and its author has been extracted from electronic literary magazines and literary reviews. Interviews with the author as well as seminars

and lectures in video and mp3 audio formats have been extremely useful in the still relative lack of availability of more traditional sources of literary criticism on the text.

A Postmodern novel?

Postmodern art and postmodern thought do not necessarily go hand in hand. A piece of art considered postmodern may betray a certain inclination to a postmodern way of thinking and may even appeal to "shared" postmodern traits as codes that are identifiable by an audience. But there are artists who make use of many postmodern technicalities in order to create cultural artifacts that break the spell of postmodern perplexity towards some of the "grand narratives" that might still be useful to retain as counterbalance to injustice, state terrorism and hard-core immigration policies. For artists like Marjane Satrapi, Lalo Alcaraz, Guillermo Gómez-Peña or Edwige Danticat it is crucial to question and dismantle interiorized values on gender and race informed by Eurocentric heteronormativity and religious and political authoritarianism. These are the "grand narratives" that need to be questioned and fought. But in order to do so, works like Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) re-engage with many of the other "grand narratives" of social justice, gender equality and democracy, values that are probably more necessary now than ever.

When speaking of postmodern thought Terry Eagleton's definition is extremely enlightening:

> By 'postmodern', I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity.
>
> (Eagleton 2003: 13)

In the era of postmodern thought and relativism it is no surprise that Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the ultimate postmodern novel in form, was received with critical acclaim and awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. What is certainly interesting is that underneath its postmodern technicalities we find a political novel deeply committed with History and unquestionable absolute values. Furthermore, Díaz manages to turn the typically postmodern suspicion of authority into a denunciation of the historical reasons for uprootedness, slavery and oppression. Through the "little stories" of the de León family and the continuous disruption of intelligibilities, Díaz builds a novel that clearly and uncompromisingly seeks to restore global political responsibility in a post-capitalist world where relativism has undermined "big ideas" and universal values.

What Díaz seems to propose in the novel is that it is as necessary to question (author)itarianisms and the violence it produces as it is reasserting democratic values and rights, such as the non-acceptance of the silencing of the oppressed other. Thus *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) brings to the fore the

story of Dominicans in their Diasporic experience and contextualizes the Trujillato as one of the cruelest dictatorships that ever took place and the reasons for their massive migration to the United States. Furthermore, the novel establishes these events as part of a larger historical process of systematic colonization and exploitation that began with Columbus's arrival in the New World, the Dominican Republic being the "Ground Zero" of the whole continent's history of violence and authoritarianisms.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao fills in the gaps, the blank spaces of History and gives voice to the silence of Dominicans after the wasteland left behind by a dictatorship that ruled the country with implacable brutality between 1930 and 1961. Aware of the terrible burden carried by his fellow countrymen's silence, Junot Díaz began to wonder about both the nature of authority and the innate fondness for authoritarianism that have so deeply influenced America's history. The novel is precisely the result of eleven years of hard work and debate on how to recount the little stories and the big history of Dominicans in all their complexities without the authority of an objective, single-voiced narrative (Lennon 2007).

Junot Díaz is concerned about what he calls "our craving for cohesive narratives; those narratives which have historically led us into so much trouble" (Díaz 2008), and so the novel continuously deploys a whole range of different techniques in order to blur intelligibilities and confuse a linear, coherent reading. The diversity of registers used by Díaz, from black urban slang to science-fiction language and from idiomatic English to academic footnotes, allows him to disrupt the linearity of discourse and undermine certainties. Moreover, multiplicity of voices, perspectives

and heteroglossia not only work as elements that undermine monologic narratives, but they also reflect the violence implicit in the telling of a story in the sense that it implies the silencing/censoring of many others.

History, memory, and roots have definitely political implications, and Díaz's use of postmodern technicalities betrays a non-cynical position that seeks to question the masternarratives implied in (author)itarianisms while looking at democracy, human rights and the undoing of subalternities as the only possible means to prevent dictatorships and diasporas from taking place again and again. Authoritarian regimes, massive migrations, dislocation and colonizing enterprises are phenomena that do not usually take place randomly and for no reason. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a serious, violently funny novel that openly proposes a reflection upon the nature and consequences of such phenomena and a call for responsible political action.

According to Terry Eagleton:

> We need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple rather than monolithic. Some of those forms will have something of the intimacy of tribal community relations, while others will be more abstract, mediated and indirect. There is no single ideal size of society to belong to, no Cinderella's slipper of a space. The ideal size of community used to be known as the nation-state, but even some nationalists no longer see this as the only desirable terrain. If men and women need freedom and mobility, they also need a sense of tradition and belonging. There is nothing retrograde about roots. The Postmodern cult of

> the migrant, which sometimes succeeds in making migrants sound even more enviable than rock stars, is a good deal too supercilious in this respect.
>
> (Eagleton 2003: 21)

By bringing the silenced history of the Dominican Diaspora to the center, Díaz proves that roots count, that identity is definitely a big issue, and that the diasporic experience of the de León family is certainly no enviable story, for it is full of misery and difficulties. Beli, Oscar's mother and one of the main protagonists of the novel, is forced to leave the Dominican Republic after being raped and tortured by Trujillo's thugs and head for the uncertainties of migration: "She had raised me and my brother by herself, she had worked three jobs until she could buy this house we live in, she had survived being abandoned by my father, she had come from Santo Domingo all by herself and as a young girl she claimed to have been beaten, set on fire, left for dead" (Díaz: 2007 60). In New Jersey the de León family faces the difficulties of being Spanish-speaking, dark-skinned, Latino immigrants in an English-speaking universe that is organized around ghettos and where identity reassertion and belonging are crucial factors:

> Every day he watched the "cool" kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. In the old days it had been the whitekids [sic] who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color who performed the necessaries.

(Díaz 2007: 264)

The negotiation of identities is one of the most important features of the novel, where Oscar and Lola desperately look for alternative spaces outside mainstream expectations and traditional Dominican values. Lola needs to find her own way out of her mother's oppressive presence: "You don't know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—e*specially* the ones that are never around. What it's like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave" (Díaz 2007: 56); and also from Dominican patriarchy, where women are systematically objectified and frequently abused: "When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbour looked like, or even his name" (Díaz 2007: 57). Oscar, on the other hand, desperately tries to fit in, be accepted by both his Dominican equals and the Anglo heteronormativity: "The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am [sic]. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy" (Díaz 2007: 49). In a globalized, multicultural society both Lola and Oscar deal with and struggle for new forms of belonging and new ways of co-existing with identity roots, freedom and mobility.

What makes *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* extremely interesting is that it uses many of the formal features of the typical postmodern novel—dislocation of perspective and discourse, pastiche of genres—to bring the history and identity of a particular community to the fore and thus undermine the postmodern claim that "identity is no more than an illusory construct that can be transformed at will through parodic performance" (Malpas 2005: 106). Even the novel's critique of the masternarratives and cultural discourses that shape identity is politically engaged in the sense that these discourses are openly denounced as invalid.

What clearly seems to be at stake in the novel is Author-itarian violence and authoritarianism in all their forms. The author's most important artistic and political concerns are the ones related with the implications of having a voice over the silenced ones and the harmful consequences of single-voiced political systems and regimes. For Díaz, the telling of a story implies the silencing of many other stories (Díaz 2008), and this is crucial in order to understand the novel's dislocated perspective. Even though Yunior The Watcher is the main narrator of the novel, his voice shifts from the typical hypermuscled teenage Latino to the History academic. At some points it is Lola, and not Yunior, who tells her own story and at other times, it is not clear whose voice is narrating. New Jersey slang gives way to Dominican Spanish, and the languages of genre literature and role-playing games are disrupted by formal academic footnotes in a novel that violates the reader's comfort zone and expectations. According to Bakhtin's concept of Heteroglossia, it would be logical to think that through this "noise" and the unintelligible co-existence of and conflict between these different types of speech,

it is the author's voice, in its attempt to democratize as much as possible, that is heard in a refracted way, even though it may mean incurring in a risk of apparent cacophony.

Against (Author)itarian Violence

Who tells the story and for what reason? Where is the voice of the author if there is any at all? In a complex and multi-voiced novel like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* it would be difficult to answer these questions since what is under suspicion is precisely the nature of authority. All stories told have many other counter stories that have never seen the light and most probably never will be conveyed. Díaz's anxiety when confronted with the activity of single-voiced stories comes from being a Dominican who grew up under the shadow of a dictatorship, and the spell of a claustrophobic silence that even many years after the death of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, aka El Jefe, followed the lives of Dominicans, no matter how far they exiled. Every time the name Trujillo was mentioned, Díaz recalls the way in which every single member of his family acted as if nothing happened and how the atmosphere began to thicken until there was practically no air to breathe. This is what Díaz remembers from his childhood after he was brought to New Jersey at the early age of six in the turbulent decade of the seventies, when Dominicans by the thousands were leaving the wasteland of their country behind due to the Trujillato and Joaquín Balaguer's governments.

It is that silence loaded with message that Michel Foucault refers to in his *History of Sexuality*:

> Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say. There is not one but many silences and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.
>
> (Foucault 1990: Vol I p. 27)

According to this Foucauldian concept of silence, what is not said has discursive presence and is loaded with meaning because it goes hand-in-hand with the things said; it can thus be symbolized and represented. Thus *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* would be the representational practice of Díaz's experience when confronted with that silence and what it says about the past and realities of thousands and thousands of diasporic Dominicans that suffered the Trujillato. For other theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, true silences are from those who cannot speak: "Please remember. I am not talking about resistance groups but of people who accept wretchedness as normality. That's the subaltern, those are the folks I worked with" (Spivak 2010: 16). In this sense, even though Díaz is speaking for the Other, the silences he represents in the novel are not the ones of the subaltern who cannot speak, but the ones of his diasporic family and neighbors in

Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in the Western hemisphere, where subalternity does not exist. The most striking of all is Tillie Olsen's reminder of the existence of festering silences even within the Western world. Olsen talks about silence imposed by circumstances:

> Silences [. . .] concerned with [. . .] circumstances- including class, color, sex; the times, climate into which one is born [. . .]The silences I speak of here are unnatural; the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.
>
> (Olsen 1989)

If we acknowledge that transnational stories in the globalized Western hemisphere are constant negotiations of identity and struggles for social mobility, Tillie Olsen's idea of circumstances seems appropriate when looking into the diasporic lives represented in the novel. Because circumstances can produce fluctuations between subalternity and agency, as well as between silence and production of meaning.

If silence is crucial in order to understand the origins of the novel, it is similarly important when analyzing Yunior's narrative voice. According to the author, Yunior's force as narrator lies in his silence, in the things he does not say, or rather, in the things he chooses to hide from us as readers. The fact that Yunior has different registers and voices as narrator (at times, to the point of narrative schizophrenia), produces not only a sense of unreliability, but also the notion that

there is always something missing. Something behind the "noise," the agility of his discourse, and the diversity of voices used betray a mysterious silence about his real motivations as narrator.

The first footnote of the novel anticipates this stratification of voices, languages and speech styles that characterizes the entire text. Here, all narrative expectations break completely, while a disruptive voice addresses the reader:

> For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato 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; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. At first glance, he was just your Prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up.
>
> (Díaz 2007: 3)

This footnote appears at a moment when we as readers are trying to make sense of a previous narrative voice, Yunior's, who explains the origins of the "fukú, the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Díaz 2007: 1). By the time we are trying to understand whose voice and whose story is being told, a new voice? or, the same voice with a different register? or, the author's voice? addresses the reader directly and advances that the information that is about to be provided has been ignored by mainstream Western education, which neglects 'insignificant' histories such as the Dominican Republic´s. What follows is a description of the dictator in different registers that goes from academically formal to colloquial language. The passage inserts a word in Spanish, "personaje," right after a series of genre literature references like Sauron (from popular J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*). Here, the anonymous voice of the footnote allows itself all sorts of linguistic licenses in order to make a thorough contextualization of Trujillo and his dictatorship and thus break any attempt at discovering where this voice comes from. But even though the origins and identity of this narrative voice—apparently it is Yunior in a different register—remain unclear, we find that there is a strong sense of denunciation of silenced atrocities and, as the passage continues, a clear political agenda:

> Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo); for making ill monopolies out of every slice of the national patrimony (which quickly made him one of the wealthiest men on the planet); for building one of the largest militaries in the hemisphere

> (dude had bomber wings, for fuck's sake); for fucking every hot girl in sight , even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women; for expecting, no, *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was "Dios y Trujillo"; for running the country like it was a Marine boot camp. Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; 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 the argentinos are still appealing; the creation of the first modern kleptocracy (Trujillo was Mobutu before Mobutu was Mobutu); the systematic bribing of American senators; and, last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do).
>
> (Díaz 2007: 2-3)

Here, as the amount of information grows at the rhythm of semicolons, the disruption of intelligibilities continues with typographical insertions (capitals as in "ALL THE NAMES" and cursive in "*insisting*"), voice shifts in the same sentence, including the use of extremely colloquial expressions ("dude had bomber wings, for fuck's sake"). The vertiginous change of perspective takes the discourse from a distant tone to an intimate, friendly one that even seems to take for granted complicities with the reader. The limits and possibilities of the spoken and written

language are stretched in order to create a certain state of surrendered perplexity in the reader. Underneath that state of perplexity lies the clarity and forcefulness of the footnote's arguments, because even though we might not be so sure about who is actually speaking or whose perspective it is, the data and the information provided reach the reader without opacity. The narrative voice of the footnote reveals only that he is Latin, but aren't there different voices within the same voice? What remain intelligible are the facts, the horrors, the conspiracies, and the oppression of Dominicans. Issues like the CIA-backed dictatorships in Latin America, the Haitian genocide, and Trujillo's kleptocracy are exposed to the light in all their sinister brightness. Interestingly, this issue of transparency from opacity in the era of mass media and technology is an extremely postmodern one, where we receive messages and information denouncing or exposing state corruption and political manipulations without a clear, accountable for source, such as in the case of Wikipedia and Wikileaks. The supposedly democratizing effect of transparency for the public opinion is somewhat obscured by the opacity related with the origins of the information, which, at times, ends up raising more suspicion and uneasiness among citizenship. This is exactly the debate the novel establishes within this dynamics of the enormous amount of information provided by unclear sources for unclear purposes. As readers, our craving for clarity, transparency, linearity and, most important of all, for (A)uthority is precisely what the novel is constantly subverting. This is precisely one of the crucial issues of the novel: without a single-voiced, cohesive, linear narrative that constitutes a reliable and consistent source of information, the text not only undermines (A)uthority, it also demands an active role from its readership; it forces the reader to act commitedly

as engaged readers and responsibly as citizens and voters. As in our post-capitalist[2], mass media-influenced era, in which information reaches from different and varied sources, the text deliberately forces its reader to reach his/her own conclusions. Only thus we would be able to take political responsibility for our actions, learn from history, and take stock of the world we live in.

Díaz's anxieties about the nature of authority and the dangers implied in telling stories, in being the Author, are seen in the antagonistic symmetry that Yunior establishes between writers and dictators in footnote number 11:

> What is it with Dictators and Writers anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Deathstroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. 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.*
>
> (Díaz, 2007: 97)

The novel then becomes a site for debate, where authorship is so unreliable that even the teller of stories doubts about himself and compares the violence

[2] By post-capitalist, I do not mean that the present is not fueled by capitalism, but that the form of capitalism we are experiencing is changing. Amidst the current crisis and amount of speculation, we are yet to understand what this new form of capitalism will become.

exercised by dictators to the one produced by single voiced interpretations of reality carried out by writers. In this sense, instead of being a source of unified, cohesive signification, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an open, metanarrative discussion not only on how dangerously violent single-voiced narratives like dictatorships can be, but also on the repeated temptations of reproducing the single-voice dynamics in apparently innocent activities like telling stories or providing information. It would not be illogical to think that the novel contains as much, or probably more, information on the recent history of the Dominican Republic than a History manual, which are usually biased and single-voiced. In the novel, by contrast, the academic, the fictional, the journalistic converge against the purity of "a knowledge." By confusing, by creating 'noise' around itself, the novel manages to unleash its force through the heteroglossic voices used by the author, according to Bakhtin, the main site of conflict of the novel (Bakhtin 1981: 259).

In Bakhtin's own words, "the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages'" (Bakhtin, 1981: 262). In "The Discourse of the Novel," he defines the novel "as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (1981: 262). This stratification of voices is taken to its limits in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where different styles, different types of speech, different levels of narration continuously disrupt/inform each other.

Disruption of Narrative Voices/Levels

According to Simon Malpas, Lyotard's concept of the postmodern "sublime," as opposed to the feeling of harmony and attraction between the subject and the work of art, "indicates a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain: simultaneous attraction and repulsion, awe and terror. It disturbs, and challenges the subject to respond without determining in advance what form that response should take." (Malpas 2005: 28). In Díaz's novel, recognition is disrupted by the multiple layers of narration that disorient and force the reader to react in search of a supratextual voice that provides cohesion. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where even the title is misleading, Yunior The Watcher is the *faux* main narrator because other voices are heard at the different discursive and textual levels. Lola, Yunior's love but to whom he is incapable of keeping faithful, tells her own story first person in Chapter two, "Wildwood". At the beginning of this episode, Lola's own narrative voice is fragmented and a stream of consciousness passage, typographically marked in cursive, breaks the first person narration and shifts into a second person interior monologue in which she tells how she found out about her mother's breast cancer:

> It's never the changes we want that change everything.
>
> *This is how it all starts: with your mother calling you into the bathroom* [. . .] *And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are*

> *overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change. You become light-headed and you can feel a throbbing in your blood, a beat, a rhythm, a drum. Bright lights zoom through you like photon torpedoes, like comets. You don't know how or why you know this thing but that you know it cannot be doubted* [. . .] *And like that, everything changes. Before the winter is out the doctors remove that breast you were kneading, along with the auxiliary lymph node. Because of the operations she will have trouble lifting her arm over her head for the rest of her life. Her hair begins to fall out, and one day she pulls it all out herself and puts it inside a plastic bag. You change too. Not right away, but it happens. And it's in that bathroom where it all begins. Where you begin.*
>
> A punk chick. That's what I became. A Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk chick.
>
> (Díaz, 2007: 55)

In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that the literary technicalities that make postmodern fiction such a contradictory cultural enterprise produce what she calls historiographic metafiction.¨ According to Simon Malpas, historiographic metafiction:

> (I)s a self-conscious mode of writing, a writing that meta-fictionally comments on and investigates its own status as fiction as well as questioning our ideas of the relation between fiction, reality and truth. Its

> focus on history opens up problems about the possibility of access to a 'true' past as a way of de-naturalising present ideas and institutions.
>
> (Malpas, 2005: 26)

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this metafictional activity is present throughout the novel in the constant shifts of perspective and narrative voice as well as in the unreliability of Yunior's narration. He calls himself the Watcher, but much of the information he provides originates in rumours, "chismes," story-telling, like in "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral—1955-1962," where Yunior reveals that The Gangster, Beli's *enamorado*, was Trujillo's sister's husband:

> There are those alive who claim that La Fea had actually been a pro herself in the time before the rise of her brother, but that seems to be more calumny than anything, like saying that Balaguer fathered a dozen illegitimate children and then used the pueblo's money to hush it up—wait, that's true, but probably not the other—shit, who can keep track of what's true and what's false in a country as baká as ours.
>
> (Díaz 139)

The possibility to grasp a coherent, "truthful" account of facts by the reader is constantly disrupted by Yunior's metanarrative confession that his sources and even himself are not reliable. In contrast, the footnote's narrative voice, which is apparently Yunior's as well, is extremely concerned with historic “truth." In the footnotes, historical facts, dates and names are revealed without a single hint of ambiguity. Yunior, in a narrative act of discursive schizophrenia, is able to act as a

young Dominican stud that presumes to know the de Leon's familiar stories first hand, while at the same time plays the historian expert concerned about our ignorance. Why is it then that the veracity surrounding the stories of Beli, Oscar and Lola is not always clear and the footnotes are to be believed as unquestionable truths? Is it the author's emphasis on raising a historical and political conscience that would allow us to learn and not forget? Here, the typically postmodern ontological uncertainty remains on the side of who is telling and on the reliability of the de Leon stories, not on the side of what was happening in the Dominican Republic at that historical moment. It is as if the novel would be in a postmodern disguise of uncertainties that manages somehow to release a clear political voice of dissent. In this sense, the novel, a continuous dialogue between big and little (hi)stories, between fact and fiction, between different voices within the same voice, is clearly a reflection upon the authority of 'truth'.

According to Linda Hutcheon, there is no question that the past is real; what is at stake is the access that we are able to have to it and its possible effects on contemporary ideas and actions. She argues that postmodern fiction depicts the past as a series of problematic and often contradictory texts, events and artifacts that confront the reader, thereby giving rise to a series of complex questions (Malpas, 2005: 26) about "identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; and the ideological implications of writing about history" (Hutcheon, 1988: 117). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the past is certainly problematic and contradictory in the sense that fictional past interacts with historical past in a narrative that makes us lose track and doubt about the truthful nature of events. Nevertheless, among all the "noise"

the novel creates around the representation of the past, the text manages to position itself ideologically before crucial issues that involve a political approach, such as history and cultural identity.

The disruption of a stable narrative voice is clearly seen in the dialogue between the main narrative and the footnotes voice. That is the case, for instance, at the beginning of chapter five, "Poor Abelard," when the origins of the de León's misfortunes are about to be recounted: "When the family talks about it at all—which is like never—they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (Díaz 2007: 211). Right after the word "Trujillo," the footnote leads to the following footnote that responds directly to the main text:

> There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards "discovered" the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?
>
> (2007: 211)

For Yunior, the Footnoter, the "discovery" of America by Columbus or the U.S. invasion in 1916—significantly, episodes in history that have left a deep wound in subsequent generations of Dominicans and Latin Americans in general—are far more relevant than Abelard's little miseries. This dialogue between the main text and the footnote is no more than the conflict between "little" stories and big History. Postmodern concern for small narratives finds its counterbalance in the

presence of footnotes that keep the reader thinking critically in political terms.

What Fredric Jameson names the postmodern "depthlessness" and its subsequent "weakening of historicity" (Jameson, 1991: 6) are here subverted by a voice deeply engaged with the importance of historical truth. In the middle of this discursive conflict, the reader tries to decipher a great amount of coded information in order to follow the dynamics of the narrative. In this episode, the politically aware voice of the footnote raises the issue of historiography, implying that history can be told from many different perspectives. Furthermore, by arguing that "this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves," Yunior the Footnoter places Yunior the Storyteller as a narrator with a mission: to tell the family's story the way they would want him to tell it. He thus invests himself with unlimited powers of and access to "truth." This is taken to the extreme in the same chapter, where Yunior narrates how Oscar's grandfather was sent to prison:

> A thousand tales I could tell you about Abelard's imprisonment—a thousand tales to wring the salt from your motherfucking *eyes*—but I'm going to spare you the anguish, the torture, the loneliness, and the sickness of those fourteen wasted years, spare you in fact the events and leave you with only the consequences (and you should wonder, rightly, if I've spared you anything).
>
> (Díaz: 2007 250)

In this passage, full of metanarrative playfulness and irony, Yunior addresses the reader directly in order to let him or her know that not only he knows "a thousand

stories," but also that he decides how he manages those stories and gives a thorough description of the prison poor Abelard was sent to:

> Nigüa and El Pozo de Nagua were death camps—Ultamos—considered the worst prisons in the New World. Most niggers who ended up in Nigüa during the Trujillato never left alive, and those who did probably wished they hadn't [. . .] Nigüa had many famous alumni, including the writer Juan Bosch, who would go on to become Exiled Anti-Trujillista Number One and eventually president of the Dominican Republic.
>
> (Díaz: 2007 250)

The omnipresent, multifaceted Yunior not only knows all the little stories, he is also historically and geographically precise in his footnotes, the accurate voice of silenced horrors. As in academic dissertations, footnotes in the novel are carefully placed in order to complete the information on the main text. Furthermore, in what seems to be a parody of academicism, footnotes invest their texts with a higher "authority," turning them into uncontestable arguments.

Again we loose track of the narrative voice in the third chapter, "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral." According to the tone and speech style, it could still be Yunior's voice, but, is it possible that he had access to all the details concerning Beli's story back in 1955? Intelligibility here is again disrupted not only in relation to who is actually narrating the story but also in terms of the veracity of Beli's story. Because if we don't know who is telling the story and we are not so sure about why it is told, then how are we readers to trust what we read? To what

degree of complicities/licenses is the text forcing us to agree for the sake of knowledge of both the plot of the story and the horrors of history?

If we are to think that Yunior is really The Watcher, the multiple voiced schizophrenic narrator that tells all the stories from different perspectives, what conclusions can we draw from the fact that only Lola is allowed a voice of her own? Is it out of love, compassion, or guilt? Or is what seems to be Lola's voice actually Yunior's? And most important of all: why should we, as readers, then tolerate the impersonation and speaking for another in a text that deliberately sets out to lay bare the horrors of the passive complicity of the people in front of those who have historically committed the same oppression?

Yunior's unreliability as a narrator is made evident in the sixth chapter, "Land of the Lost, 1992-1995," where he narrates about Oscar's love story with Ybón, the Dominican prostitute for whom Oscar will eventually give his life. In the episode A NOTE FROM YOUR AUTHOR, Yunior confesses: "But then I'd be lying. I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?" (Díaz: 2007 285).

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[3] even the title could mislead the reader to think that he or she will be told the story of somebody named Oscar Wao. And whereas it is partly so, it is equally true that Oscar's presence is nowhere near

[3] The title actually plays with two important literary references: Ernest Hemingway´s *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and, of course, the author Oscar Wilde.

what the title seems to anticipate. The title is also misleading in the sense that Oscar's life is brief, but as the novel progresses we learn that it is definitely not wondrous. Not even the reasons why Yunior "needs" to tell the story of Oscar and his family are clear: out of guilt, for not having done anything to prevent Oscar's tragic death? Out of love for Lola? To *zafa* the *fukú*—to undo the curse over those who were in contact with the doomed, namely the de Leóns? Yunior's ambiguous intentions as a narrator are equaled by a similarly obscure attitude towards Oscar himself: "I liked to play it up as complete philanthropy, but that's not exactly true. Sure I wanted to help Lola out, watch out for her crazy-ass brother (knew he was the only thing she really loved in this world), but I also was taking care of my own damn self" (Díaz, 2007: 170). Back in Rutgers, Yunior is at the same time cruel and paternalistic with the 'hero' of the novel: "Even brought him out with me and the boys. Not anything serious—just out for a drink when it was a crowd of us and his monstro-ness wouldn't show so much (the boys hating—What's next? We start inviting out the homeless?)" (Díaz, 2007: 176). To make things more confusing, not even Wao is Oscar's real surname; it is a phonetic degeneration of Wilde from his schoolmates at Rutgers—Yunior included—and a direct reference to Oscar's effeminacy and chubbiness:

> Halloween he made the mistake of dressing up as Doctor Who, was real proud of his outfit too. When I saw him on Easton, with two other writing-section clowns, I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey ,Wao, what you doing?

(Díaz 2007: 180)

This idea of namelessness proves again the contradictory nature of the most identifiable narrative voice, that of Yunior, who, on the one hand, denounces the tyranny of authoritarian regimes, and on the other, is the agent of the de-authorization of Oscar's real name. In the same way Christopher Columbus decided that Native Americans were to be called "Indians," Yunior deliberately gives our "hero" a distorted and distorting name—what bigger proof of authoritarianism than believing one can misname the other in the ultimate act of misrecognition?—becoming thus a perpetuator of the horror.

The life of Oscar de León, an overweight ghetto nerd whose world whirls around role-playing games and fantasy and science fiction literature, proves to be a really miserable one in which he is denied not only the warmth of a mother, since his is unable to provide motherly love, but also the capacity to participate in his community and the appreciation of his equals. Taken as a point of departure, Oscar's relentless quest for love and attention from girls as well as his tragic death end up being just another story and probably not the most important one in the novel. Obviously, the title is itself an irony, because Oscar, the only character in the novel that really does not have a voice of his own, does not have the strong presence the title would suggest. It is the irony of real life, where poetic justice exists only in the world of fantasy, the world of Oscar's Saurons, hobbits, and super galactic heroes.

If the narrative voices and levels are constantly shifting in order to create a difficult and uncomfortable atmosphere around authority and authorship, truth

and fiction, Yunior's direct communication with the reader can certainly produce the effect of certain complicity. In what seems another postmodern strategy, the narration takes us by the hand by continuously appealing to our understanding and promoting our participation. Thus Yunior's voices clearly subvert the limits of traditional narrative and break the rules of the realist novel. One of the many ways in which Yunior establishes complicities is through references to popular and high culture, for instance, the clear allusion to Melville's *Moby Dick* in the description of Beli's crush for Jack Pujols: "Now fully, ahem, endowed, Beli returned to El Redentor from summer break to the alarm of faculty and students alike and set out to track down Jack Pujols with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who. (And of all these things the albino boy was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?)" (Díaz, 2007: 95). But even this constant allusion to references from culture becomes problematic because, while it is true that in one passage the reader feels comfortable sharing codes with the narrator, it is equally true that in the next passage he or she is violently pulled out of his or her cultural comfort zone, and even out of his or her political zone. Most readers are aware of the fact that Latin America has historically suffered through dictatorships of all sorts. What probably not many readers are fully conscious of is the extent to which those dictatorships were actually orchestrated, maneuvered and backed by he CIA; and that the Dominican Republic had been invaded and occupied by the U.S.: "The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924" (Díaz: 19). Moreover, while most readers are aware of the fact that the Dominican Republic is one of the preferred touristic destinations due to its

wonderful beaches and resorts, they may not be fully conscious that behind those touristic resorts there is exploitation, extreme poverty, and racism:

> (A)fter he'd watched shirtless shoeless seven-year-olds fighting each other for the scraps he'd left on his plate at an outdoor café [. . .] after a skeletal vieja grabbed both his hands and begged him for a penny [. . .] the mind-boggling poverty, the snarl of streets and rusting zinc shacks that were the barrios [. . .] after he'd seen his first Haitians kicked off a guagua because niggers claimed they "smelled."
>
> (Díaz 2007: 276-9)

Furthermore, on the same island, Haiti's population has been systematically oppressed by U.S.-backed dictator Duvalier ("ended up working for that other Caribbean nightmare, the Haitian dictator, François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier [. . .] shot Abbes and his family and then blew their fucking house up" [2007: 111]) and also systematically massacred by another U.S.-backed dictator in the Dominican Republic: Rafael Leónidas Trujillo: "After Trujillo launched the 1937 genocide of Haitian and Haitian Dominicans genocide, you didn't see many Haitian types working in the DR" (2007: 218). It is precisely when the reader is pulled out of his or her comfort zone and literally forced to acknowledge other realities, when the message, paradoxically, seems to be more striking.

Stratification of Languages/ Levels and Types of Speech

Another important postmodern aspect of the novel is the use of a multiple layer mixture of linguistic registers derived from Dominican Spanish, academic English, urban Spanglish, ghetto colloquial forms and the specific jargon of different literary genres. Also, the violently funny tone of the diversified narration presents a unique compound of humorous satire, playful irony, and seriously bitter sarcasm—typical features of postmodern fiction that the novel displays very frequently in one single sentence or passage, as we shall see. The same way narrative voices and narrative time shift frenetically, the discursive rhythm—deeply influenced by Caribbean music, according to the author (Díaz, 2008)—produce a rich and highly complex literary language of its own that disconcerts the reader in need of a unified "message." In the chapter "Land of the Lost-1992-1995", where Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic for holidays, Yunior describes the summers in Santo Domingo:

> Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year's cadenas and paquetes, and pilots fear for their planes—overburdened beyond belief—and for themselves; restaurants, bars, clubs, theaters, malecones, beaches, resorts, hotels, moteles, extra rooms, barrios, colonias, campos, ingenios swarm with quisqueyanos from the world over. Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home! Form Washington Heights to Roma, from Perth Amboy to Tokyo, from Brijeporr to Amsterdam, from Lawrence to San Juan; this is when basic thermodynamic principle gets

> modified so that reality can reflect a final aspect, the picking-up of big-assed girls and the taking of said to moteles; it's one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German and Italian tourists love to rape—yes, sir, nothing like a Santo Domingo summer.
>
> (Díaz 2007: 273)

In this passage, we find a humorous description and enumeration of elements both in Spanish and English of the "Diaspora in reverse," in which a number of not so funny issues are raised: the massive worldwide dispersion of Diasporic Dominicans—the "expelled children," and the unequal conditions of those who did not have the opportunity to escape poverty, the still marginal conditions of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and finally, the common practice of child sexual abuse by Westerners in impoverished countries. The initially funny style of the passage gives way to a bitter sarcastic one full of overt social and political critique.

One of the most important features of the novel is the constant stretching of the English language by "infection" from other languages—mainly Spanish—as well as the disruption of the genre of the novel through the "noise" of subgenres. In words of the author himself: "How many registers what we call English can sustain before it falls apart?" (Díaz 2008). In the following passage, a good command of written Spanish—colloquial Dominican, to be precise—is required in order to grasp any meaning: "A new girl. Constantina. In her twenties, sunny and amiable, whose cuerpo was all pipa and no culo, a "mujer alegre" (in the parlance of the

period). More than once Constantina arrived to lunch straight from a night of partying, smelling of whiskey and stale cigarettes. Muchacha, you wouldn't believe el lío en que me metí anoche" (Díaz: 112).

Being a Dominican immigrant who lived in the ghetto of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Díaz knows the hardships and linguistic complexities derived from integration in an Anglo society, which can be extremely deaf to foreign voices and languages. What is interesting is that Díaz manages to be the voice of the ghetto without becoming the "native informant" that reduces the complex cultural and historical background of a community into fixed identities for the white audience. The novel is filled with Dominican Spanish, ghetto jargon and Latino cultural references, which makes intelligibility difficult for non-Spanish speakers, non-Latinos and non-Dominican readers. The same way non-experts on sci-fi, pop culture, comics and TV series from the seventies might feel slightly excluded from complicities between the text and knowledgeable readers in those references, English-only speakers will definitely observe that much material in the novel escapes their understanding. This idea of defying certainties has devastating effects on the linguistic level, because it challenges Anglo-Americanness, which is informed by Eurocentric ideas of "oneness," that neglects and dehumanizes the narratives of the colonised other. By imposing the frequent use of Spanish in a novel written in English, based on the stories of Dominicans migrating to the U.S., the novel manages to relocate the "Americanness" of North America, forcing readers to re-examine its hegemonic geopolitical role. Furthermore, by displacing Anglo readership from the centre of the narrative, the novel induces to empathize with the difficulties of not understanding and not being understood when

confronted with a different linguistic context in a foreign country. The novel thus invites the reader to be, in words of Judith Butler: "open to narration that decentres us from our supremacy" (Butler 2006: 18). Unfortunately, this overt political stance becomes somewhat blurred in the translated version of the novel into Spanish, a project that not even Díaz himself felt capable of carrying out. The reason why a translation into Spanish would de-politicize the novel is because the disruptive presence of the Spanish language stands as interference to the hegemony of English within the dynamics of the novel. Spanish—also a language associated with the colonizing enterprise—is somehow the language of resistance in the novel, as well as an identity marker of the specific origins of probably the largest minority in the multicultural U.S. If ideology is learned through language, the constant appearance of Spanish seeks to threaten the very foundations of Anglo supremacist discourses. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shocks the Anglo reader by forcing her or him to face the hardships of integration and internalization of different linguistic and cultural codes, which immigrants—legal and illegal—face everyday in the U.S. Even though it is nowhere near the amount of suffering an immigrant has to go through, the disturbing effect of linguistic disruption manages to convey a firm political position.

During a seminar in Key West, where Díaz was invited to talk about his literary project and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the author was questioned by one of the assistants, an English-speaking lady, about "all those passages in Spanish" that she had to skip because she did not understand a single word. In response, Díaz talked about his idea of "reading collectively:" We need each other's knowledge and capacities in order to fill the gaps, to make the

unintelligible intelligible, sharing each other's experiences. He confessed that the fact that he didn't know any Latin did not prevent him from reading Melville's *Moby Dick*. In this sense, the fact that we don't speak or understand written Spanish; or that we are not knowledgeable readers of the genres, their writers and jargons; or that we are not experts *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings*, are not obstacles. If we assume that there is no such thing as full understanding, perhaps we might seize the opportunity to change the unidirectional dynamics in the circulation of meaning by starting collective reading (Díaz, 2008).

Pastiche of Literary Genres/ Styles/High and Pop Culture

Another typically postmodern element introduced in the novel is the pastiche. According to Linda Hutcheon: "Parody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders. For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention" (Hutcheon, 2002: 89). With the democratization of culture and the introduction of new and different forms of artistic expression generated in the new era of mass-media, communications and technology, the limits between high and popular culture have become more and more blurred. Traditional, 'old' artistic forms are blended with comic books, TV series, *film noir*, the so-called 'minor' literary genres like sci-fi, fantasy or detective fiction, and joined other forms of new *avant garde* video and stage performance favored by technologic advance. Postmodern art and

its belief in the fragmentary nature of reality sought to dismantle the boundaries between high and low culture and explored the infinite possibilities of deconstructing the limits of artistic categorization. Equally, postmodernist fiction and its focus on style and artistic representation has seen this as an opportunity to mix elements from popular and arcane cultures in fragmentary narrative structures that celebrate the disruption of clarity, scientific reason and philosophical thought. Whether this implies a sort of "escapism" from concrete social, historical and political realities and a lack of critical edge, is something on which critics have not yet reached a common verdict. Critics like Linda Hutcheon argue that even though there is a nostalgic, neoconservative recovery of past meaning in contemporary culture, "Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation" (Hutcheon, 2002: 94). Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, establishes a distinction between parody and pastiche: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (Jameson, 2009: 17). It would be difficult to determine exactly what function the use of the pastiche in the novel has, but what remains clear is that there it carries indeed a strong parody of the traditional forms of narration. The figure of the "old" realist, omniscient narrator is laughed at, subverted, and criticized by the inconsistencies of an obscure, schizophrenic, unreliable narrator who constantly seeks for the complicities of the reader. In this aspect, the political stance of the novel lies in the fact that there is an intention to

subvert the very notion of authority that informs the circulation of meaning. By leaving us bereft of a reliable source of information, the novel forces us to face the uncertainties of de-authorization and to assume the responsibilities implied in the creation of "truth."

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is certainly a postmodern novel in its use of the pastiche as an aesthetic resource that blends together *The Lord of the Rings* and Melville with *Star Wars*, Doctor Who and Oscar Wilde; Alice Walker with Paulo Coelho; *The Sound of Music* with *The Jeffersons*; *X-Men* with Shakespeare; Isaac Asimov with James Joyce and *The Matrix*; Dickens with *Star Trek*; and a long etcetera. It is as if the universal library of Borges would have turned into a postmodern intertext that is constantly appealing to the reader's knowledge on classic literature, role games, fantasy books, animation series and movies. Oscar, the novel's "hero" is a compulsive reader of the Genres, a role game, comic fanboy: "could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee [. . .] Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (Díaz, 2007: 21). Notice the capital 'N' in 'normal' to mimic the importance of the concept of "normalization", crucial in western postcapitalist heteronormativity. In the following note from the same page, Oscar's outworldness and alienation is related in extremely funny terms with his Caribbean origins:

> Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi

> than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)
>
> (Díaz 2007: 21, 22)

In the following passage, the inclusion of pop culture references is taken to the extent to which intelligibility is almost impossible unless the reader is an expert on sci-fi and *Star Trek*: "My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside, it's hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on "*la face cachée de la Terre*" (Earth's hidden face)" (2007: 92). What makes this passage important is not whether we readers know who Jack Kirby or Uatu the Watcher are—which, if we do, will surely make the reading more pleasurable—but the fact that we may be able to grasp the affinity and solidarity with those who live on the oppressed side of the world. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is full of such references in which what is relevant is not the amount of knowledge readers have on the Genres or TV series or J.R.R. Tolkien, but those readers' potentiality of "hearing" the supratextual voice that constantly establishes a game with the reader. It is as if all those references amuse, confuse, and ultimately hypnotize the reader in order to be able to lead him or her through parallel stories flowing at that supratextual dimension that invites—without moralizing—to re-examine definitions of social justice and degrees of political awareness.

Parallel to the mixture of styles we find the constant use of role-playing games and sci-fi jargon, mainly associated with Oscar and his nerdiness. Oscar's alienation is marked in the novel by a specific style, in which he introduces the speech forms of Jedis, Elves, and superheroes and the use of flash words. Oscar's speech stands out from that of his schoolmates and neighbors in Demarest, Rutgers, Paterson and even in the Dominican Republic: "talked like a *Star Trek* computer!" (Díaz 2007: 173), making him appear as a "freak" to his equals. In words of the narrator: "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (2007: 22). Deeply identified with the fanboy pop culture, Oscar's self-styled speech manners highlight his isolation from the rest of boys and girls of his community: "Demarest won't be the same without your mesomorphic grimness, he said matter-of-factly [. . .] You should visit me in Paterson when you have a reprieve. I have a plethora of Japanimation for your viewing pleasure" (2007: 195). Furthermore, Oscar's lack of a voice of his own is reinforced by his incapacity to communicate with the other through commonly shared codes. By incapacitating Oscar to be the narrator of his own story and instead allowing him only momentary episodes as a marginal protagonist, Yunior seems to perpetuate those same authoritarian models of oppression and silence that he criticizes as a footnoter. The paradox continues even further: by highlighting Oscar's nerdiness and passion for the genres and sci-fiction series, Yunior is able to hide his own inclination to and knowledge of *Akira*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and Stephen King. Yunior constantly deploys a deep knowledge of the genres, role-playing games, and Marvel comics, in the main

text and in the footnotes, which inevitably make the reader wonder whether what Yunior rejects in Oscar is not in himself. If they both share the same passions and interests, what distinguishes Oscar from Yunior? Why does Yunior place Oscar in the position of the poor nerdy loser? Again here, Yunior's incapacity to be a reliable narrator is equaled by his incapacity to love, trust, and be trusted by the ones around him. Yunior's untrustworthiness and lack of values add to the reader's uneasiness about the main narrator of the novel, who thus creates a dynamic of double standards that asks the reader to do what he cannot: empathize with the other, learn from history, and re-engage with democracy.

Heteroglossia

The Russian theorist M.M. Bakhtin highlighted how traditional stylistics had largely ignored the social dimension of discourse. For him, "form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (Bakhtin 2008: 259). For Bakhtin, it is crucial to distinguish the distinctive social dialogue among languages that is present in the novel:

> The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions,

> languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour [. . .] this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel.
>
> (2008: 263)

Published in the late 1930's, Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the novel" established the bases for a new approach to the novel in close dialogue with sociological and philosophical aspects. In his study and systematization of the stylistic unities that allow the heteroglossia of the novel to take place, Bakhtin seems to anticipate some of the most characteristic features of the postmodern novel. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the different narrative voices, diverse registers and languages talking to and informing each other, stand as the Bakhtinian heteroglossia. The existence of conflicting discourses is certainly one of the novel's most significant features, which at the same time opens up an interesting debate as to whether the presence of heteroglossia contributes to the generation of cacophony attempting to prevent single-voice and single-project narrative lines—those narratives which have led us to wars—to emerge; or/and on the other hand/ at the same time, heterogossia works in the novel as a democratizing device that

allows the traditionally voiceless to be represented. Yunior the Storyteller, Yunior the Footnoter, Lola, Beli, Oscar, oral tradition, fukús, pastiche of the genres, (H)istory; all seem to speak in different directions, at different levels in different languages. I argue that more than as a democratic device, the flaws and inconsistencies of the narrative line force us to think in democratic terms, to judge for ourselves, and to do so critically, as not all the information may necessarily be reliable. To be democratically responsible is to be able to hear among all the "noise" around us; listen to untold stories; empathize with the other; undo subalternities; take stock of the world we live in.

Against (Author)itarianism

If it is extremely difficult to define and differentiate the "postmodern" in terms of clear-cut, easily distinguished features, it is no less hard to determine what it is we consider postmodern literature. Even though the main purpose of this dissertation is not to provide insights in order to reach a narrower or more efficient definition of postmodern fiction, it is of my interest to open a discussion on the political implications in postmodern representations. By choosing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as the object of study, I highlight the importance of politically engaged literary practices in a globalised cultural era that, paradoxically, celebrates the local and is skeptical of the universal. I am interested in literary projects that recuperate history in order to revise the present in a moment—the age of mass media and information—when knowledge tends to de-historicize itself.

If art has traditionally been the mirror, the consciousness and the unconsciousness of our societies, the work of artists such as Díaz is extremely relevant in order to highlight the importance—now more than ever—of re-engaging with the close relationships established between the material, political, racial, sexual and social conditions with the formation of subjectivities/identities, and the subsequent power relations that perpetuate subalternities. *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* is a non-melancholic, revisionist look into the past that seeks to understand the present from the perspective of those who were and often still are doomed to silence and marginalization. Even though Díaz is a member of the Dominican American community himself, the novelist assumes the dangers implied in "speaking for the other" when telling the horrors his fellow Dominicans have gone through from the discovery of America to Balaguer; the enslaving of Africans to the "encomiendas" of the Spanish colonies; the extermination of Taínos to the Dominican Diaspora; and the U.S. invasions to the Trujillato. The need to re-read history and voice its untold chapters is certainly a politically committed artistic practice that denounces and screams against how grievability for all those lost lives is denied, and how their right to be recognized as victims that can and must be mourned has been obliterated. As Judith Butler poignantly questions in "Violence, Mourning, Politics (Butler, *Precarious Life,* 2006)" "How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss?" (2006: 32). By decentering the mainstream Eurocentric approach to history and switching the focus from victimizer to victim, Díaz questions the very foundations of an ideological system that selects the existence and non-existence of realities. How does this derealization take place? According to Butler:

> It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. It is another thing to say that discourse itself effects violence through omission.
>
> (Butler, 2006: 34)

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the dead, the tortured, the enslaved, the oppressed of Dominican history are brought to the visibility of the surface, if only for one time, where they are able to recover their representability and their right to be remembered. This is the real political dimension of Díaz's novel: with narrative virtuosity, the novel delivers uncontestable truths about the violence of denying the existence of the Other, of erasing the humanness of all those neglected lives.

The violence implicit in the derealization of human lives by history asks for a critical opening of the questions, in Butler's words: "What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?" (2006: 33). In this sense, the negated lives "cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never 'were,' or and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the Other means that *it* is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (2006: 33-34, my emphasis). It is this idea of the specter, of the undead,

of the inexistence, that connects with the representation of the historical past of the Dominican Republic in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Oscar himself stands as the symbol of the spectral figure devoid of presence and voice, who is completely invisible to the others and whose wanderings during his long depressions remind of the soulless vagrants that inhabit the limbo: He is the neighborhood *parigüayo* (from party-watcher), the one who "simply stand(s) at the edge of dances and watch(es) [. . .] The kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him—he's the parigüayo.[. . .] It is a name that would haunt him for the rest of his life" (2007: 20). Oscar's state of undeadness is seen in his lack of agency even when it comes to materializing his own death; he is absolutely disempowered by Yunior, who does not even enable Oscar to end his own life in an act that would lead to the end of his sufferings:

> If he'd landed on Route 18, as planned, it would have been lights out forever. But in his drunken confusion he must have miscalculated, or maybe, as his mother claims, he was being watched from up on high, because the dude missed 18 proper and landed on the divider! Which should have been fine. Those dividers on 18 are like concrete guillotines. Would have done him lovely. Burst him into intestinal confetti. Except that this one was one of those garden dividers that they plant shrubs on and he hit the freshly tilled loam and not the concrete. Instead of finding himself in nerd heaven—where every nerd gets fifty-eight virgins to role-play with—he woke up in Robert Wood Johnson with two broken legs and a separated shoulder, feeling like, well, he'd jumped off the New Brunswick train bridge.

(Díaz, 2007: 191)

Oscar's story seems to stand at the top of a list of the uncountable Dominicans, Caribbean, Latin Americans, who for reasons of their race, class or sexual preferences have perished under the rubble of the whole continents atavistic authoritarianism and anti-democratic traditions.

Certainly *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is not the first novel that deals with the Trujillato and its devastating effects for millions of Dominicans, or simply, about the life in the country during the dark years of the dictatorship. We should not forget that the death of Trujillo did not signify the end of troubles for Dominicans; a new social, political, and cultural era began under governmental chaos and instability: from Balaguer to the State Council; Bosch to the *Triunviratos*; the April Revolution to, again, Balaguer's *neotrujillismo*, which ruled the country until 1978. Under these circumstances, it was certainly difficult to establish a narrative tradition that would help alleviate and heal the wounds of one of Latin America's longest and cruelest dictatorships. Due to the oppressive cultural atmosphere and the strict control exercised by the censoring apparatus of the Trujillato, there was an evident fear to write and publish narrative fiction and all sorts of essayistic work that might recount what was occurring in the country. From the early period there are three interesting narrative works about the life in the Dominican Republic during the hard days of Trujillo: Ramón Marrero Aristy's pro-trujillista *Over* (1940); Juan Isidro Jiménes Grullón's *Una Gestapo en América* (1941); and Andrés Requena's *Cementerio sin cruces* (1949). About *Una Gestapo en*

América, also referred to and quoted by Yunior in a footnote in Abelard's episode (Díaz 2007: 250), Neil Larson argues:

> Ha contribuido de manera inequívoca a la tarea de exponer ante un lector dominicano y Latinoamericano los extremos del fascismo alcanzados ya en los primeros años del régimen trujillista. La primera edición dominicana del libro, que apareció en el año 1962, cuando ya muchos de los secretos celosamente guardados por el régimen, iban sacándose a la luz, es particularmente importante en este contexto histórico. El testimonio de Jiménes Grullón representa, y a la vez tipifica, las múltiples historias que desde la caída de Trujillo han dado contorno al retrato del trujillato como época de corrupción y violencia aberrantes, desde luego estigmatizada por lo que parece haber sido una fuente inagotable de malicia.
>
> (Larson: 92)

After Trujillo's death, narrative fiction is scarce, but we find extensive publishing of historiography works and sociopolitical essays. According to Alcántara Almánzar: "Ello tiene su explicación: el análisis sociopolítico y la reevaluación histórica eran una necesidad después de la caída del régimen que había conseguido hacer tergiversar la historia a conveniencia de su propia práctica política" (1984: 73). Among the most interesting non-fiction works from the period immediately after Trujillo's death are: Teodoro Tejada's *Yo investigué la muerte de Trujillo* (1963); Rafael Meyreles Soler's *Así mataron a Trujillo* (1965); Arturo Espaillat's *Trujillo:*

anatomía de un dictador (1967); *¿Quienes y por qué eliminaron a Trujillo?* (1975); Eduardo Matos Díaz's *Anecdotario de una tiranía* (1976); Pablo Clase's *Porfirio Rubirosa, El primer Play Boy del mundo* (1978); and Victor Garrido's *En la ruta de mi vida* (1970). Even though the sixties were not prolific in the Dominican Republic in terms of fiction writing and publishing, it can be pointed out Marcio Veloz Maggiolo's *Los ángeles de hueso* (1967) as one of the most important novels published during that period. From the same author, *De abril en adelante* (1975) and *La biografía difusa de Sombra Castañeda* (1981) also deal with the issue of the Trujillato using anthropological and psychological perspectives.

Díaz's writing of the novel is seemingly mediated by his reading of literature and historical texts about the Trujillo Era, including the dictator's propaganda disguised under biography and historical chronicles. Among the works that might have influenced *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'s intertextuality, we find Jesús Galíndez's *La Era de Trujillo* (1958). The story of Jesús de Galíndez (Manuel Vázquez Montalbán wrote his novel *Galíndez* (1990) based on the true story of his imprisonment, torture and assasination at the hands of Trujillo's squads) is told by Yunior in footnotes (2007: 96, 225). Also important were Robert D. Crassweler's *Trujillo. The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator*; José Almoina's *Satrapy in the Caribbean* (1949) and *Yo fui secretario de Trujillo* (1950); and Bernard Diederich's *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* (1978).

Apart from these texts, two other contemporary works which are in dialogue with Díaz's novel have also gained widespread international readership: Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *La*

fiesta del chivo (2000), two historic novels that fictionalize the period of the Trujillato and contribute to the re-construction of the Dominican Republic's recent history. The intertextual relationship between these texts and Díaz's novel is nevertheless tense due to the overt critique deployed by Yunior's narrative of both Alvarez's and Vargas Llosa's novels. References to these in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* appear mainly in relation to the tragic stories of Hypatía Belicia Cabral and her father, Dr. Abelard. The same way the lives of the Mirabal sisters are fictionalized by Julia Alvarez's neohistoric novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Yunior highlights the importance of their struggle in a footnote:

> The Mirabal Sisters were the Great Martyrs of that period. Patría Mercedes, Minerva Argentina, and María Teresa—three beautiful sisters from Salcedo who resisted Trujillo and were murdered for it. (One of the main reasons why the women from Salcedo have reputations for being so incredibly fierce, don't take shit from nobody, not even a Trujillo.) Their murders and the subsequent public outcry are believed by many to have signaled the official beginning of the end of the Trujillato, the "tipping point," when folks finally decided enough was enough.
>
> (2007: 83)

But Yunior takes this act of intertextuality to the point of actual literary review when he refers to Julia Alvarez's novel in the passage where he recounts Beli's difficulties to integrate at El Redentor school, one of the best in Baní, attended by the children of the higher classes, and where Beli was granted a scholarship:

> Let's just say, by the end of her second quarter Beli could walk down the hall without fear that anyone would crack on her. The downside of this of course was that she was completely alone. (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 her).
>
> (2007: 83)

Even though *In the Time of the Butterflies* deals with the story of the Mirabal sisters, the most famous anti-Trujillistas in the history of the Dominican Republic, and implies an explicit denunciation of the Trujillato, Yunior's comment reveals a certain critique of the novel's tendency to idealize the social dimension of a period that was marked by the enormous differences between the privileged classes—to which the Mirabal sisters belonged—and those who lived in poverty; and ignore the material circumstances that produced these realities.

Similarly, Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* seems to be criticized for its lack of political edge and historical accuracy, for instance in a footnote in which Yunior describes Balaguer and his deeds:

> After Trujillo's death he would take over Project Domo and rule the country from 1960 to 1962, from 1966 to 1978, and again from 1986 to 1996 [. . .] During the second period of his rule, known locally as the Twelve years, he unleashed a wave of violence against the Dominican left, death-squading hundreds and driving thousands more out of the country. It was he who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora [. . .] Joaquín Balaguer was a

> Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief [. . .] Appeared as a sympathetic character in Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*.
>
> (2007: 90)

Furthermore, Yunior—we still don't know and probably never will know whether Yunior is Díaz's narrative alter ego or just "another voice"—dismisses Vargas Llosa's text for its lack of originality:

> Let's be honest, though. The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island. As common as krill. (Not that krill is too common on the island but you get the drift.) So common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn't have to do much except open his mouth to sift it out of the air. There's one of these bellaco tales in almost everybody's hometown. It's one of those easy stories because in essence *it explains it all* [. . .] Shit really is perfect. Makes for plenty of fun reading.
>
> (2007: 244-5)

Whether these questionings of the political validity/accuracy of Alvarez and Vargas Llosa's texts are or not legitimate is beyond the main purpose of this dissertation. What is relevant to its analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the fact that there is a clear focus in its arguments that reveal the author's relentless questioning of the extent to which we as citizens have been engaged in the process of learning and denouncing the brutalities of dictatorships and the degree of our political engagement when re-reading history. Unlike figures of the

so-called McOndo group[4] (which clearly seeks to distance itself from the Magic Realism of Gabriel García Márquez , and its "cult of the underdeveloped" [Fuguet n.p.]), in which Junot Díaz seems to be included, he proposes a novel with clear and open political overtones. In an interview, he has in fact admitted that he has "an agenda to write politics without letting the reader think it is political" (Céspedes 901), even when the novel's playfulness, pastiche, irony and use of the genres do not manage to hide the political edge of its statements.

If it is clear that Díaz is engaged in a political approach to cultural representation, we would still need to consider whether the astonishing success of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[5] is a result of its politicized focus on history and its determination to give voice to the unheard or is due to its masterful introduction of popular culture and the innovative groove of its narrative. The reasons for its success may well be the combination of postmodern technicalities that are appealing to mainstream readership and to the constant witty humor with which it delivers stories of poverty, repression, rape, torture, and murder in an

[4] The McOndo (a word play on Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* and McDonald's) literary group was born under the myth of the late colombian writer Andrés Caicedo as an opposition to the politically metaphoric, exotic and rural narratives of the Magic Realism and the Latin American Boom of the 60's and 70's. Alberto Fuguet, Giannina Braschi, Edmundo Paz-Soldán, Hernán Rivera Letelier, Jorge Franco, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Pia Barros y Sergio Gómez are the most representative members of a literary movement that seeks to replace essentialist visions of Latin America with urban, pop-inflected globalism and the effects of mass media and massive consumerism in private, personal stories. Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez wrote what is considered the group's manifesto, *McOndo* (1996), in which urban disaffection and banality seem to have replaced social awareness and political engagement.

[5] *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* granted Díaz extensive critical acclaim and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction; a *New York Times* Notable Book; the Ansfield-Wolf Book Award; the *Time*'s #1 Fiction Book of the Year; the John Sargent, Sr. First Novel Prize; and, most importantly, the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

uncompromisingly committed tone of political and social denunciation. In other words, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the site where Macondo meets McOndo, in a literary dimension where pop culture, urban life and personal stories co-exist with history and memory, and in which the revalidation of universal values implies a political reassessment of the past and the present. To move on does not always or necessarily imply the absolute negation of the past; it can also entail a critical approach to its implications in the present. In his novel, Díaz evaluates our urban, individualist, postmodern perceptions (McOndo), while remaining true to the spirit of social justice and political commitment of the Magic Realism (Macondo).

The 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction jury was composed of Elizabeth Taylor, a book critic from the *Chicago Tribune*; Francine Prose, an author and critic; and Oscar Villalon, a book editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Although the novel´s clear intention to raise political conscience was obviously not a *sine qua non condition* to grant Díaz the Prize, it may be pertinent to consider that perhaps the post-Bush mainstream cultural market was by 2007 opened up to more self-critical approaches, especially if those critical approaches came from non-Anglo Americans. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the extreme complexity and variety of themes delivered by the novel allow it to escape labeling, which is perhaps one of its greatest achievements; however, we can not be blind to the fact that escaping labels and compromising intelligibilities can also have clear aesthetic and political implications. The novel's complexity, wide array of registers, dialects, languages, styles, levels of narration, etc., uncovers that there is an intention to disrupt the comprehension of the average reader, regardless of his or her profile, cultural

background, and/or education. No matter how expert the reader is on classic science fiction or sword-and-sorcery novels, if he or she does not understand written Spanish, his or her possibilities to fully comprehend the text are dramatically reduced. To have full knowledge of recent Caribbean history does not guarantee a linear comprehension of the novel if you are not fluent in Jersey Dominican slang, and although the reader might have read *Moby Dick*, it does not guarantee his or her recognition of Sauron or Akira.

One of the most important political arguments implicit in the novel is that full, measurable intelligibility is by all means an illusion. To accept that perfect communication is nothing but a dream (Dìaz 2008) and that elusiveness is and must be part of the comings and goings of messages. The novel unsettles the reader due to the Western post-capitalist hunger and need to cover and dominate everything within narratives of control and power. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* recreates what it is to be disempowered by what we cannot fully understand; by the utterances we cannot fully grasp; by the languages we cannot speak; by the things we couldn't learn; and by the opportunities we never had. This is why Díaz's call for reading collectively is political, because it requires the knowledge and participation of all members of a community and thus counterspell single interpretations that produce single-voiced narratives, the genesis of authoritarianism.

Yet for whom does Junot Díaz write? *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* a novel written in English about the experience of a Latino community, has been interpreted in a variety of ways. For instance, critic Ignacio López Calvo argues

that Díaz is the typical native informant that makes the complexities of his community/ethnic minority readable to mainstream audiences:

> Is he not unwillingly giving us that "voyeuristic thrill" that he tries to avoid? While the novel at times suggests that Díaz writes with Dominican and Dominican American readers in mind (for example, when the narrator states "It's all true, plataneros" [155]), it is also evident that many of Yunior's footnotes (or are they Díaz's footnotes?) are concise explanations of slang (pariguayo), beliefs (guanguas, mongooses, fukús, zafas), traditions, superstitions, legends, and historical characters and events with which most Dominicans and Dominican Americans are already familiar. The footnotes, which are in the lower frequencies, challenge the main text, which is the higher narrative. The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king [. . .] While this approach is commendable, the information included in his footnotes is still very close to what I would consider the cultural translations of a native informant, even if Díaz leaves entire phrases in Spanish without translation and refuses to use quotation marks or italics. And, of course, that the novel was written in English also suggests that he did not have the "plataneros" on the island in mind.
>
> (López-Calvo n.p.)

The argument of this dissertation is, however, that although Díaz explicates many Dominican and Latino cultural features for an Anglo audience, the novel is far from being a translating artifact that reduces the complex cultural and historical

background of the Dominican community into fixed identities for a white readership, as native informants are expected to do. By bringing Dominican culture closer and showing its complexities, the novel de-simplifies stereotyped visions of the Latino, a label that very often tends to encompass many different communities and overview the particularities of Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and many others. The fact that Díaz uses a humorous style when dealing with many of Dominican features is more connected to self-criticism than to the intention of providing an essentialist view of Dominicanness. Furthermore, the novel eludes any reassertion of identity and exposes atavistic identity markers that have proven to be harmful such as hypermasculinity, misogyny, and self-hate. Of course Junot Díaz did not have the "plataneros on the island," in mind, in reference to López-Calvo's accusation. To pretend that he is addressing his own people is part of Yunior's playfulness, in a witty technique that allows him to deliver uncontestable truths and facts. Of course Díaz is addressing a mainstream white Anglo readership and he is certainly "informing" this audience about true historical events that happen to be absent from textbooks. What is at stake in the novel is not Dominican identity and its translation, the main concern for López-Calvo, as much as the Pan-American history of violence, marginalization and uprootedness.

To suggest that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* essentializes Dominican identity is to overlook the enormous complexity and political dimension of a novel in which critique and denunciation operate in many directions. Although it is true that identity is an important issue in the text, Díaz's concerns gravitate around how identities are constructed. Not only is it Dominicanness that is questioned, so are Eurocentrism, Imperialism, and

heteronormativity. The novel questions the nature of authority and how it influences the internalization of self-notions of otherness and subalternity regardless of its form or nationality. Díaz´s writing confronts the reader with historical facts that tragically iterate the consequences of the Eurocentric (mis)conception of the American continent. From Christopher Columbus to George W. Bush, this ongoing perpetual distortion (or fukú, in Yunior´s words) has resulted in the exploitation of the bodies of millions of human beings who did not share the white man's concept of progress, and who were forced to work and starve for a dream that was not theirs.

Authoritarianism in America has a long and rich tradition that began with the expansive ambitions of the European colonizing enterprises. In the words of María Teresa Pita Moreda, colonialism is: "La teoría y práctica política y socio-económica que justifica cualquier fórmula de dominación de un determinado territorio, incluido un estado soberano" (Pita Moreda: 181). From 1492, Spain, Portugal, Holland and France struggled to establish their colonies in America and consolidate their hegemony on the continent. Colonization of America was, after all, the logical consequence of European commercial and maritime expansion. Following mercantilist concepts of trade, great maritime companies were founded in order to "discover" and colonize new territories. With all sorts of privileges, these companies held sovereign rights over those bestowed lands and were able to keep armies, administer justice and mint currency. After its Independence, the United States joined the European powers as one of the major imperialist forces. According to Hermes Tovar Pinzón:

> Le correspondió a España, Inglaterra y los Estados Unidos ejercer en sucesivas fases el dominio sobre la vida económica y cultural americana. El imperialismo como relación de fuerza, es un concepto moderno derivado mucho más de la arbitrariedad de los imperios que de la simple oposición de los pueblos sujetos a la voluntad de sus armas. En América Latina, el imperialismo se vincula esencialmente con las intervenciones armadas de los Estados Unidos en casi todos los países americanos. México, Nicaragua, Panamá o Colombia, y también otros, conocen muy bien la forma de operar de este sistema político. En 1903 Panamá fue cercenada de Colombia por parte de los Estados Unidos, con el fin de controlar el Canal de Panamá. Las ocupaciones de Cuba, Nicaragua y Santo Domingo se han hecho con fines de imposición de aparatos políticos represivos, de defensa de dictaduras militares y de regímenes al servicio del poder extranjero. Ningún concepto político en América Latina ha dejado tantas cicatrices como este del imperialismo. De todas formas, una historia del imperialism en América Latina debe cobijar no sólo relaciones históricas pasadas, sino que debe repasar las actitudes imperiales de otros pueblos que, como Inglaterra, lo practican aún en regiones marginales de Latinoamérica.
>
> (Tovar Pinzón: 373-4)

Díaz's novel reveals the need to reread history and examine the reasons that lead to colonization and imperialism, as well as to the twentieth century Latin American dictatorships. The Trujillato is arguably the tipping point of a series of historical events that keep repeating themselves in a never-ending "fukú" of corruption and

economic interests. For Díaz, the CIA is as guilty for orchestrating dictatorships as corrupt political systems are for compromising their economic sovereignty to entities like United Fruit Co. or United Brands Co. This is the origin of the "repúblicas bananeras," in which foreign companies established their states within states. In the words of Felipe del Pozo: "Constituía un arquetipo de economía de enclave, carente de articulación con los respectivos espacios nacionales: capital extranjero, producción exportada al mercado estdounidense y ferrocarriles propios, destinados a acarrearla hasta el puerto de salida, normalmente también controlado por la compañía" (del Pozo: 187). It was to protect such interests, mainly in the Caribbean and Latin American, the reason why the U.S. plotted against democratically elected presidents, installed authoritarian regimes, and invaded countries.

What *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* provides us with is not pieces of Dominican history that readers would not be able to find in History textbooks. The novel chooses to offer the version of those who were defeated. Díaz awakens the specters of those who never appear in history books, and when they do, it is as simple numbers, prisoners, slaves, or casualties of wars. Díaz´s project presents them as victims and witnesses of historical horrors and allows them to testify against authoritarianism. The "fukú" that befalls Oscar and the de León family is interconnected with the doom that Columbus brought to the shores of La Española and the plight of the Trujillato in a narrative line that makes historic sense, among fictional disorder, aimed at promoting political awareness.

Regardless of the prototypic reader Junot Díaz addresses, the novel demands a response from the readership, who will inevitably feel questioned. By being directly addressed, the reader is literally demanded to assume responsibility, to position himself or herself politically against authoritarianism and to vote accordingly. Written during the George W. Bush period, the novel not only echoes progressive and leftists' firm opposition to the neo-conservative lobbyists' agenda; it also voices the gradual disenchantment of the general citizenship after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. On several occasions, Yunior explicitly refers to Bush's War on Terror, and he equates the brutalities committed by U.S. forces during the invasions and occupations of the Dominican Republic to events in Iraq: "LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965). (Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq)" (2007: 4); "(You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either)" (2007: 19). The novel, through the voice of Yunior, constantly displays overt criticism of the U.S.'s international actions at the turn of the millennium, and this may itself be a reflection of the general uneasiness of public opinion, from the dissident voices in the U.S. to the worldwide negative reaction against the Bush administration's threatening of vulnerable lives.

Conclusions

The analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a novel about the Dominican Diaspora and the Trujillo dictatorship, lays bare the debate between the text and the historical moment in which it was written, and highlights the extent to which it reflects a more widespread notion among citizenship that local and international power relations desperately require a re-evaluation of inherited traditional notions of the Other; a questioning of the discourses on which these notions are founded; and most importantly, a denunciation of the atrocities committed on those foundations. By informing and denouncing, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* actually manages to raise political conscience that promotes the assumption of responsibilities as citizens. The study shows how not only at the semantic level, but also at the formal and aesthetic ones, the novel questions the traditional concepts of authority based on single-voiced narratives. The analysis of its formal and aesthetic devices lays bare the continuous disruption of linear and cohesive intelligibilities, questioning thus assumed notions about the acquisition of knowledge.

Through the analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it seems evident that it encourages the reader to take stock of the misdoings and re-engage in the re-construction of nonnegotiable values like empathy with the reality of others and the negotiation of meanings. If authority is questioned it is because of the violence with which it operates upon the unheard, and therefore a re-thinking of the notion of authority is made necessary (O'Rourke n.p.). Equally, authoritarianism is rejected as a coercive and oppressive form of government

based on state terrorism and violence, therefore alternative forms of governing are required.

As to the question of the novel's postmodernity, it could be concluded that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a formally postmodern novel that openly opposes the cynicism and relativism that are often linked with postmodern literary expressions. Although the novel continuously seeks to stretch the limits of comfortable intelligibilities—a markedly postmodern trait—the denunciation of historical atrocities and injustice, the report of violation of human rights, the recount of the hardships of migration, dislocation and marginalization and the call for global political responsibility, are elements that are more likely aimed at shaking conscience than at coping with the undecipherable instability of reality. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is then a modern literary project in a postmodern novel that seeks to recuperate "modern" values, those "grand narratives" that are still fundamental in order to re-think power relations in a world that is more and more globalized but, alas, progressively unequal.

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