

Politics and Literature:  
Dictatorship in Junot Díaz's  
*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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**Abstract**

This article explores the political dimension of Junot Díaz's work, focusing on the figure of the dictator as depicted in the footnotes to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in an attempt to analyze his view of the "dangers of dictatorship" in both literature and politics and to prove that the political attitudes of writers influence the way their literature "does" politics. Thus, a thorough analysis of the footnotes exposes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a story about a nerd in New Jersey "dictated" by the narrator, which is challenged by the story of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo who "dictated" the recent history of the Dominican Republic.

**Keywords:** politics and literature, Junot Díaz, dictatorship, Trujillo, footnotes, Dominican Republic.

As shown in the title, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, narrates "the short happy life" of Oscar de León (and of his family), also known as Oscar Wao, an American Dominican boy obsessed with the *fukú americanus* curse and its "high priest," the Dominican "then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina" (Díaz 2). The timeline of the novel is not linear, and its main narrator is

Yunior, himself a Dominican immigrant living in New Jersey, Díaz's voice in the novel and its true author.

Towards the middle of the story, there are several flashbacks spread over a few chapters in which Yunior describes events that took place decades earlier, apparently focused on Oscar's mother Hypatia Belicia Cabral (nicknamed "Beli") and his grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, but populated with numerous references to secondary events. These events of a secondary importance in the central story of Oscar's life provided the framework for the history of his family in Santo Domingo, before the time when they migrated to the US, during the Trujillato, under the rule of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, nicknamed El Jefe (1891-1961). One of the main themes of the novel is the identity of the Dominican diaspora in the United States, but it also reads like a meditation on the nature of dictatorship, the dangers of authoritarian political power, and the relationship between dictators and writers (O'Rourke).

In his fiction, and in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in particular, Díaz portrays Dominicans, especially their leaders, like, for example, Rafael Trujillo and Joaquín Balaguer, as racists who reject their African heritage, acting primarily like pure-breed Dominican machos. Even though he refuses the label of a native informer who explains cultural references, Díaz does precisely that in Yunior's footnotes in the novel, which are nothing else but explanations of Dominican slang (*parigüayo*), Dominican beliefs (The Mongoose, *zafa*), traditions, superstitions, legends, descriptions of historical characters (Trujillo, Balaguer) which American Dominicans are very familiar with. After publishing *Drown* in 1996, Díaz told *The New York Times* that he wrote for the people he grew up with, that he "took extreme pains for my book to not be a native informant. Not: 'This is Dominican food. This is a Spanish word.' I trust my readers, even non-Spanish ones" (Díaz qtd. in Stewart). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he seems to also trust Yunior, his alter ego, his narrator, to create a framework for the main text, one that challenges this text, and, to a certain extent, his previous standpoint. Junot Díaz, the MIT

professor, even allows Yuniór to establish a teacher-student relationship with his readers, whom he instructs on the basics of Dominican history as if they were either too ignorant or just uninterested in the topic: "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (Díaz 2). He chooses to provide them with the "mandatory" information on recent Dominican history in the footnotes to his novel, as if it were a scientific text not fiction.

In an interview he gave to Meghan O'Rourke, Díaz explains he uses footnotes in *Oscar Wao* "primarily, to create a double narrative. 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. In a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice – this felt like a smart move to me." Since the novel is, according to Díaz, about (the dangers of) dictatorship, "dictating" is involved in both "writing" and "ruling," the narrator being nothing else but just another type of "king." If we read the two definitions of the verb "to dictate," then we might also understand to what extent the two "dictators" (Trujillo and Yuniór) are similar (Harford Vargas 35).

The footnotes are not paratexts *per se*, but, as Ellen McCracken argues when she repudiates Gérard Genette's perspective upon footnotes as inadequate for interpreting the footnotes in *Oscar Wao*, they do not break the narrative; on the contrary, she continues "they carry on the performative strategies and themes of the primary text and, in effect, *are* also the text. . . . an overriding non-paratextuality also characterizes the footnotes in the novel. They are paratexts that are *not* paratexts" (50). Díaz's authorial persona speaks in both the main text and the footnotes, King Yuniór speaks about King Trujillo, or Yuniór, the writer, the professor, the dictator writes about Trujillo, the president, the general, the dictator. Therefore, they do not interrupt the voice of the narrator; they teach the readers ("students") how to understand the information in the main text, and they both challenge and continue the main text without disrupting its flow.

The auctorial voice retains the same tonality and style used in the main text, which makes it easy for the reader to switch between the two sections of the text. Moreover, the way in which the narrator describes Trujillo (for example, all the irony, the humorous Spanglish phrases, all the name calling, and offensive language used when referring to the personality of the dictator or to his deeds) paradoxically contributes to the portrait his state propaganda had created for him during his rule: the supernatural leader of the nation endowed with a “phantasmagorical” power. Díaz and his narrator both know that this perspective is mandatory even after the death of the dictator, for “without curses and alien mongooses and Sauron and Darkseid, the Trujillato cannot be accessed, eludes our modern minds. We need these fictional lenses, otherwise we cannot see” (O’Rourke). Díaz wants his reader to see what dictatorship did to the Dominican Republic, what it does to the world and how “dictators” manifest their supernatural powers in both politics and literature.

Díaz states his purpose in the novel by including the reference to the Dominican dictator, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, early in his description of the “*Fukú americanus*,” linking his name to the greatest curse of the New World, a curse that transcends time and space, a curse more real than life itself. Trujillo is the high priest, the servant, the grand master, the agent of the fukú, and knowing him is of crucial importance for the (American Dominican or not) reader. That is why the first footnote introduces the reader to the history of the Dominican Republic, with special focus on the twentieth century and the rule of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, a dictator Díaz describes as a mythical character who exerted full control on the destiny of the country and its people. In the first footnote, Trujillo is depicted as a grotesque caricature of a historical character who was, undoubtedly, exceptional in the history of humanity and of the Caribbean. His long rule, as a president of the republic or as the *generalissimo*, the military commander of the country was also one of the most brutal dictatorships in the New World and not only. The personality cult, the violence, the murders, the terror turned him into an almost

“supernatural” being, with powers beyond the imagination of sci-fi writers: “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 2).

Díaz’s irony is obvious throughout the entire text of the footnote which, besides challenging the information in the main text, also attests to the fact that the narrator himself, in contrast to public imagination or the creative imagination of sci-fi writers, possesses the abilities required for an accurate portrayal of the dictator. The narrator builds Trujillo’s portrait on several contrasting traits, which merge to give birth to a crossbred, paradoxical being, a real – “supernatural” ruler, who is both feared and respected, both bemocked and honored. His well-known public nickname, “El Jefe,” is doubled by demeaning, insulting nicknames which would cause the death of those using them during his rule: “the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface” (Díaz 2). In most cases, the narrator uses a positive feature first, which he demolishes immediately, as if to expose the contrast between the efforts of the propaganda to portray him as a providential leader and the perception of the public: “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” (Díaz 2).

Among those “few historians,” Abelardo René Nanita stands out as Trujillo’s most prolific hagiographer who traced his origins to Europe, as a descendant of Spanish and French families, from a “proud lineage,” and “[of] pure Spanish stock” (qtd. in Vidal xiii). All the great “traits” of his ancestors, “two conquistadores,” a “Spanish Army officer and French marquis” materialized in Trujillo who became the “uncommon, enigmatic, and splendid man” known to the public as El Jefe, a man of great character and skill who never changed (Nanita 27, 31). Díaz, the “writer,” seems to direct his attack not so much against Trujillo’s personality but rather against his hagiographers, trying to find a way to overthrow every single positive trait brought up by them as true, historical fact.

Seen from this perspective, the superficial reader might look at the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* as if they were detachable sections, ready to be exported and used as non-fictional content in history textbooks.

One of the most significant changes that Trujillo brought to the Dominican Republic was related to the traditional toponymy that, beginning with his rule, was supposed to be altered so as to honor just him and his family. Visually, Díaz expresses his disgust, his outrage by using all caps and the abbreviation of the name of his thus belittled country, “DR,” in which “ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS” (for instance, the peak Pico Trujillo, the former Pico Duarte, or Ciudad Trujillo, the former Santo Domingo de Guzmán) had to honor the high priest of the *fukú*. Díaz’s perspective counters the official explanation of the time that Santo Domingo was named Ciudad Trujillo as a sign of respect for the benefactor of the city who rebuilt it after the 1930 hurricane (Nanita 6). All the landmarks whose names were changed had to be at least as exceptional as El Jefe himself: Pico Duarte, the peak on the Hispaniola Island is the highest in the Dominican Republic and in the Caribbean (3,101 m), while Santo Domingo is the capital city of the country and its most important historical landmark.

The narrator is even harsher with the physical appearance of the dictator, “[a] portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery” (Díaz 2), in contrast with the description promoted by the state propaganda and by his “panegyrists.” His biographer, Nanita, depicts him as a vivacious, sometimes cheerful, elegant, yet simple man, with an expressive face and eyes, a gentle spirit in love with music and poetry, a poet himself in his youth (Díaz 34–37). In both descriptions, the reader easily identifies references to El Jefe’s European ancestry, and, to a certain extent, to his sybaritic lifestyle. Trujillo, counted by the narrator among “the wealthiest men on the planet” (Díaz 2), enjoyed, indeed the perks of his position in the luxury of his multiple estates scattered across the country; the place he called “home” was “Estancia Ramfis,” described by Nanita as a small and cozy town providing its inhabitants with all the facilities

of a modern urban settlement – it “has every comfort for a family’s health, recreation and well-being” (55).

Nanita highlights the great love that the “model husband,” “loving father,” “affectionate brother,” and “kind kinsman” had for all those he was related to (55), especially for the First Lady and his children. Yuniór, Díaz’s narrator, on the other hand, seems to add to all this description of the perfect father and husband the pinch of salt Nanita’s eulogy needs, noting that the Generalissimo also shared his love with “every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women” (Díaz 2). Ironically, after having been married three times, the “model husband” was killed while he was on his way to see one of the ladies with whom he was having an affair at the time. His love for his family and neighbor fits perfectly with the “belief of his forebears,” but with the amendment that “God helps those who help themselves” (Vidal xiv).

The real, historical Trujillo did not believe in anything, but knew how to use the religious sensibilities of his people to fuel his quest for a united Dominican Republic under his rule. His declared Catholicism did not prevent him from cheating on his wives or from committing numerous murders, culminating with the killing of almost 20,000 Haitians in 1937 (López-Calvo 12-13). His cult of personality went as far as to advertise the Generalissimo as God’s representative on earth, as a universal monarch anointed by God and given the right to rule over his land and people forever. At some point, the churches in the Dominican Republic displayed slogans such as “Dios en cielo, Trujillo en tierra” (later reversed as: “Trujillo en tierra, Dios en cielo”) and the nights in Ciudad Trujillo were dominated by a large neon sign displaying the message “Dios y Trujillo” installed outside the house of Jacinto Bienvenido Peynado, El Jefe’s collaborator and president of the Republic between 1938 and 1940.

El Generalissimo, as president and commander of the army, managed to create what Díaz’s narrator refers to as “one of the largest militaries in the hemisphere” (Díaz 2), the second pillar in the stronghold of his power, the first being the Dominican Party he

established soon after assuming office as a president. The army required more work in order to become the powerful oppressive force El Jefe needed to protect his reign. Beyond the laudatory description of the whole process and the “historical” data related to Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina’s progress from the status of second lieutenant in the Dominican National Guard to that of Generalissimo, Nanita agrees with Yuniór’s perspective declaring that the Dominican Army “is one of Trujillo’s most finished works, and that into which he has poured the greatest measure of devotion” (87). El Jefe’s “paternal regard,” Nanita continues, for the soldiers is rewarded “with . . . loyalty and admiration,” only matched by “[t]he admiration, enthusiasm and sympathy that the population feels for our Army” (87-88). The side-effect of this great love the people feel for their army is the love they (must) feel for their “Once and Future Dictator.”

Yuniór is very specific when it comes to highlighting certain aspects related to Trujillo’s dictatorship and marks them in the text by using italics “for expecting, no, *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo” (Díaz 2–3). El Jefe ran “the country like it was a Marine boot camp” (Díaz 3), so nobody would ever disagree with the drill instructor or his acolytes, and all trespasses were punished immediately no matter who the trespasser was. Yuniór’s auxesis ends with a short note on Trujillo’s connection with the *fukú americanus*, as if it were the last thing to mention, but, all the more, the most important one, and, of course, in italics: “for his almost *supernatural* abilities” (Díaz 3).

Yuniór inserts another historical footnote about the Trujillato when he presents Oscar in his early years (he was seven) as “something of a Casanova,” or, to use his mother’s words “our little Porfirio Rubirosa” (Díaz 11-12). The footnote introduces Porfirio Rubirosa Ariza, ranked as “the third-most-famous Dominican in the world,” after Trujillo and María África Gracia Vidal (an actress known as María Montez). Yuniór’s tirade against Rubirosa contains a few details, which are presented with much irony, and which are meant to shed more light on the type of “minions” that Trujillo surrounded himself with and who set some standards with respect

to the prototype of “Dominican Player.” Unlike Oscar in his older age, Rubi maintained his supremacy as the Dominican playboy, the perfect “Domo” throughout his life, extending his influence across the borders of the Republic after his divorce from Trujillo’s daughter in 1937 and conquering internationally famous women (Yunior mentions but a few: Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke, Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor). Rubi, Trujillo’s soldier, political assassin, former son-in-law, diplomat, polo player, playboy, and race car driver died in Paris after crashing his Ferrari into a tree in the Bois de Boulogne, in Paris.

The narrator adds a separate footnote on María Montez (footnote 8) when he describes Beli’s daydreaming about falling in love with a rich European and moving to Europe to live with him in his castle. Yunior’s footnote reads like a dictionary entry about the actress, infused with his own reflections on her personality and his preference for some of her movies and books. He labels her both “the first international star the DR had” and “the nerd” who wrote three books (Díaz 87); in other words, she is, to a certain extent, described as Oscar’s female counterpart whose art made her famous in the world and whose life also ended tragically. Oscar did not become an international star by the end of his story (Yunior’s work is going to fix that, probably), but his life ended tragically as well, adding one more name to the death toll of the *fukú*.

Footnote 5 is added as an explanation of the term “parigüayo,” when the narrator describes Oscar in his sophomore year, long after his (early) days of glory as a 7-year-old “Domo.” Yunior defines the term as “a corruption of the English neologism ‘party watcher,’” a pretext for providing some context on the First American Occupation of the DR from the same perspective of a teacher instructing his student(s) in discovering more, relevant information about the recent history of the Dominican Republic (Díaz 19-20). Thus, Oscar appears to be a reincarnation of one of the US soldiers attending parties as “parigüayos,” as passive “watchers,” incapable of conquering Dominican women and destined to miss all the fun in the world. Just like Oscar, the American occupation and the US soldiers have been forgotten.

Yunior also adds that the US occupation of Iraq will be forgotten as well.

Oscar, the “parigüayo,” the absolute “nerd” was living in his “moronic inferno” surrounded by books he borrowed from the libraries in Paterson, New Jersey, and displaying “outlandish” skills, such as writing in Elvish, or speaking Chakobsa. Yunior thinks that Oscar’s obvious nerdiness might be due to his being captive between the two worlds: the DR (which he had left when he was very young) and the US (where he relocated with his family). However, in his real life, Oscar was an outsider in both worlds, “an X-Man,” “a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto” (Díaz 22).

Footnotes 7 and 21 provide the reader with historical context on the tragic story of three of the Mirabal sisters, Patria Mercedes Mirabal Reyes, María Argentina Minerva Mirabal Reyes, and Antonia María Teresa Mirabal Reyes, who resisted Trujillo’s dictatorial regime, and, as a consequence of their actions, were murdered on 25 November 1960. This murder had a significant political impact on the regime, symbolizing the beginning of the end of the Trujillato in the Dominican Republic. Yunior, the narrator, refers to the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) by Julia Álvarez, a novel based on the story of the Mirabal sisters (code-named “Mariposas,” i.e. Butterflies), which is “an alternative approach of some historiographic consequence: here the female characters finally replace the husband in his aforementioned allegorical role as the ‘people’ who are struggling to expel the usurper (Trujillo in this case) and reestablish harmony” (López-Calvo 88). Moreover, Álvarez’s novel “reclaims gender (as opposed to only class and race/ethnicity/culture) as an alternative organizing principle in the literary representation of the Trujillo Era” (López-Calvo 97), which makes it the perfect example of how Oscar’s world is demolished under the pressure of his relationship with the other gender. The Mirabal Sisters, according to Yunior, are everything Dominican men (Oscar included!) can never be: “the Great Martyrs of that period” (Díaz 83), the spark that set the

regime on fire and provided the “tipping point” (their assassination) for the Trujillato.

In footnotes 9 and 25, Yunior refers to Joaquín Antonio Balaguer Ricardo, a writer, a lawyer and a three-times president of the Republic (after the Trujillato), even though he is not essential for the story *per se* but is relevant for the story of the country. These footnotes are written in the same style, as if they were dictionary entries supplemented with the narrator’s own comments; Yunior acts like a teacher of Dominican history who introduces his students to its most important personalities, most of whom he detests. The “demon” Balaguer is nicknamed the successful, “efficient” “Election Thief” whose skills impressed the “Failed Cattle Thief,” and the “Homunculus.” Balaguer is also the author of the speech “God and Trujillo,” in which the dictator is presented like the messiah, the savior of the Dominican people (López-Calvo 12). According to Yunior, he will be remembered in Dominican historiography not as a national genius, but as “a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez” (Díaz 90). He was an intelligent monster, a far-right violent extremist, and, most importantly, the architect of the Dominican Diaspora, i.e. the one who made his own people flee abroad in search of freedom, a concept he detested.

Far more intelligent than Balaguer, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral, a fictional character (Beli’s father and Oscar’s grandfather), was the intellectual who ignored the oppressive political regime and was eventually punished for this (he was arrested by the Secret Police, his wife committed suicide, and his eldest two daughters were killed). He refused to bring his family, especially his beautiful daughter Jacquelyn, to the events organized by Trujillo in order to protect her from becoming his next mistress. When Balaguer was Minister of Education, he acted like an “agent provocateur” trying unsuccessfully to attract Abelard in discussions “about his theories – which were four parts Gobineau, four parts Goddard, and two parts German racial eugenics” (Díaz 216). The “Cerebro del Cibao”

would always avoid such intellectual confrontations keeping away from the traps set by the “Genio de Genocidio.”

The name of another real-life character, Jesús de Galíndez Suárez, is mentioned by Mauricio Ledesme, one of Beli’s classmates, in the essay in which he expressed his wish to live in a democratic and dictator-free DR: “I’d like to see our country be a democracia like the United States. I wish we would stop having dictators. Also I believe that it was Trujillo who killed Galíndez” (Díaz 96). Yunior quotes Mauricio and then adds a long footnote about Galíndez, creating the context for one of the most powerful discussions in his narrative about the relationship between writers and dictators, in general, and about the relationship between far-right dictators and “ferocious leftist” writers, in particular.

The conflict between Galíndez, the “supernerd,” the “Nerd Class 2,” and Trujillo had been ignited by the former’s doctoral dissertation exposing the cruel regime of the latter. The narrator is very specific when it comes to unveiling the murderous nature of the Trujillato and leaves no unanswered questions. El Jefe kidnapped Galíndez and killed him in Santo Domingo after a tough “viva voce” before an examination board chaired by the Failed Cattle Thief himself and composed of his toughest hitmen. Footnote 11 reads like another discussion between a (doctoral) student and a teacher (a doctoral supervisor, or a member of the examination board, this time): “(And you thought *your* committee was rough)” (Díaz 97), attesting to the fact that, if other topics may be treated more superficially, this one (the writer – dictator conflict) is serious and requires better research.

The question of Yunior’s short discussion is “What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway?” (Díaz 97), and his research starts with the history of the conflict (from Caesar versus Ovid and before) and insists on the violence involved in such disputes, which is part of the destiny of the opponents. According to Yunior, Salman Rushdie’s approach is too shallow and obviously favors writers who behave similarly to dictators in the worlds they create: “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 97). In Yunió’s opinion, writers are as bad and as totalitarian as dictators, and are, maybe, destined to be haunted forever by the “crimes” they commit (Díaz 155). Moreover, they are also equally and aggressively territorial (Díaz 224), setting up an Iron or a “Plátano Curtain” as soon as they seize power.

In conclusion, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a novel about the “dangers of dictatorship” in literature and in politics, doubled by a meditation on the role in history of those who “dictate,” be they political rulers or writers. The footnotes, which, read like dictionary entries, like footnotes in textbooks, like notes on presentations written by teachers, like transcripts of voice-over ironical comments in documentaries, provide the reader with subversive (sometimes containing offensive language) contextual, historical information, adding a necessary framework to the main text. Paradoxically, this framework both supports and challenges the main narrative, helping the narrator to construct the story of the life of an atypical Dominican immigrant in the United States and discuss the role of dictatorship in Dominican history. Yunió’s footnotes to his text, i.e. his meta-narrative, sabotage the main narrative just like any resistance would confront a dictatorship, both supporting its supernatural aura, and, at the same time, gradually eroding its mundane existence.

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