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Authority and Authorship in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

“What is it with Dictators and Writers anyway?” Yunior asks in the eleventh footnote of Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. “Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they’ve had beef...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). As the novel’s primary narrator and proclaimed author of Oscar’s story, Yunior is concerned with the association between “tyrants and scribblers” because it’s a relationship that also implicates him. But Yunior is not the only character in the novel drawn into this relationship. *Oscar Wao* is a book with many authors—from the eponymous Oscar himself, to his sister, Lola, his grandfather, Abelard, his biographer and off-and-on friend, Yunior, and of course, the real-life author of the entire novel itself, Junot Díaz. Crossing paths with the novel’s authors is a real-life historical figure and tyrant, whom Yunior hails (in his usual tongue-in-cheek fashion) as: “Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina”(Díaz 2). Although deceased by the time Yunior “writes” his book, Trujillo features prominently throughout the novel, most notably in the Abelard chapters of Book II. In these chapters an answer to Yunior’s question becomes apparent, along with an answer to the inevitable follow up question of *how* writers and dictators are alike. Abelard’s story of persecution under the Trujillo regime unites three authors, Abelard, Yunior, and Díaz, all of whom use authorship to engage (in the meaning of both tying themselves to, and entering into combat) with Trujillo’s authoritarian power in

contention over the “popular imagination” in which fictions are written, disseminated, and read as reality.

When the novel’s storyline is taken in chronological order according to the Cabral family history, Abelard is the first author in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to contend with Trujillo’s authority. He is also the first character whose life is destroyed by the Trujillo regime—his transgressions against the state supposedly precipitating the fabled family curse (*fukú*) that hangs over the surviving Cabrals for at least three successive generations. It’s Abelard’s story of destruction that Yunior attempts to write in his book decades later, following the murder of Abelard’s grandson in the continuing downward spiral of the family’s fortunes. However, while the narrative makes it clear that Trujillo’s state utterly obliterates Abelard through means of incarceration, destruction of property, torture, and eventually, death, Yunior presents three different versions of the story to explain *how* this obliteration came to be: Abelard’s eldest daughter, Jacquelyn, “the bad thing Abelard said about Trujillo,” and finally, *The Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral*. Despite his role as author, Yunior is unable to provide his reader with one complete narrative, ultimately leaving the decisions of what to believe and how to read the narrative (as a family tragedy? a supernatural conspiracy?) up to his reader. While these three stories differ significantly in their purported sources and details, each version is mediated through Yunior’s narrative voice, and each concerns the balance (or imbalance) of authority between Abelard and the state, which Abelard upsets through an assertive act of authorship, and to which the regime responds with a violent show of force.

The first version of Abelard’s story revolves around a scenario which, according to Yunior is “As common as krill” in the Dominican Republic, and is also “...one of those easy

stories [that] in essence *it explains it all*. Trujillo took your houses, your properties, put your pops and your moms in jail? Well, it was because he wanted to fuck the beautiful daughter of the house! And your family wouldn't let him!" (244). While Yuniors succinct summary is helpful, Abelard's story turns out not to be so "easy" after all, and there is much that remains unexplained by this "common as krill" template: how Abelard and Jacquelyn's social status factors into their situation, how Trujillo's demand for female bodies served to shape his authority, and why the Cabral family's ruination is seen as such an obvious outcome that it's Abelard and his refusal to provide Trujillo with his daughter's body, not the state, that is questioned and blamed for the resulting destruction. But before "the fall," and before his personal entanglement with Trujillo, Abelard lives a good life. He is privileged and brilliant—an avid reader and writer of intellectual works. He is also financially successful and lives a stable life, occupying an expansive and abundant world made up of his inherited name and wealth, his thriving surgical practice, and his family—his wife, Socorro, and two daughters, Jacquelyn and Astrid. Of course, the stability of this "good life" is completely conditional, as Abelard is living under the reign of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina and his state of terror. The comfort and privilege of Abelard's life, and by extension the lives of his family, requires his loyal and continued compliance with the regime. This compliance often demands Abelard's silence—silence on dissenting political ideas, silence on the Haitian genocide, silence on the regime's political arrests and assassinations, silence on Trujillo's personal imperfections, silence on any subject in which Trujillo's word is absolute, including the fact that, if he so wished, Trujillo could rape Abelard's daughter Jacquelyn at any time he chose without consequence. Abelard's fear over his daughter's safety is finally realized when he receives a letter from the president

specifically inviting Jacquelyn to the next presidential event, a sign that Trujillo has set his sights on her.

Under the Trujillo regime, female bodies became a medium onto which authority was written and displayed for the purpose of being read as a sign of masculine power, and the threat of sexual violence served as a means of control over the population, especially the upper classes, whose daughters tended to be Trujillo's primary targets (the reasons as to why he targeted the upper class specifically are to be addressed later in this paper). But this threat operated through under-the-table transactions, and operated in a certain degree of silence. Although Yunior's comment about the commonality of the "girl that Trujillo wanted" narrative suggests that Trujillo's sexual predation was well known among the public, it was a practice that was talked around and never officially stated. So prolific is this secret that Abelard doesn't have to be told anything more than "You should be careful with that one," by one of his patients to know the danger Trujillo poses to his daughter, and to take measures to hide her from him. "It's a well-documented fact," Yunior explains, "that if you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* Part of the price of living in Santo Domingo, one of the Island's best-known secrets" (217).¹ Yet it's both the public and private aspects of this "secret" that make it both potent and sinister. The public

¹ For Abelard, this is no vague fear without precedent, as in the course of a "spontaneous outburst" regarding Trujillo's sexual predation to a friend, he cites as an example "the name of a young woman whom the Jefe had only recently despoiled, a muchacha known to both of them, a graduate of the University of Florida and the daughter of an acquaintance" (220). Not only does this quote justify Abelard's fears, but it also provides some sense of how well known Trujillo's sexual conquests are. Not only is it known that Trujillo "despoils" girls, but in some cases, the identities of specific girls and their families are public knowledge as well. This knowledge potentially gives Trujillo power not only over the general population, but over specific individuals as well.

secret works to restrict and produce knowledge about the regime in a way that sociologist Avery Gordon describes in her book, *Ghostly Matters*, as “announc[ing] terror’s power and normaliz[ing] the impossibility of living in a constant state of fear” (Gordon 745).

According to Gordon, the public secret is “something known but unspoken and unacknowledged,” and, writing in the context of illegal abduction, she characterizes the execution of the “secret” act as being “implemented to make sure others knew what was happening” (75). It is in the interest of the regime for a vague knowledge of their deeds to be known and spread, but to maintain the deniability characteristic of secrecy, and to enforce that deniability through the threat of further violence to any who would explicitly vocalize the secret. The regime’s strict control of knowledge about itself, and its manipulation of the popular imagination through fear shapes the behavior of its subjects toward it, as they know just enough to be scared into obedience, but not enough to know who or what to be afraid of, or enough to substantiate appeals to higher authority or foreign aid.

Due to the workings of the public secret, by the time he is finally expected to bring Jacquelyn to one of Trujillo’s events, Abelard’s potential speech and actions have already been severely limited. Up until this point, he has acted the part of the good citizen, as Yunior reports that, “When banquets were held in Trujillo’s honor Abelard always drove to Santiago to attend. He arrived early, left late, smiled endlessly, and *didn’t say nothing*” (Díaz 215). There are serious, even deadly consequences for being credited as the author of the wrong act or speech, with “wrong” meaning anything that condemns or criticizes Trujillo or the regime. Yunior provides the disappearance and murder of Jesús de Galíndez, author of a doctoral dissertation on Trujillo, as an example of how the regime dealt with academics

who questioned its authority too loudly. Knowing these consequences, Abelard risks nothing by saying nothing. However, with Trujillo's "request" for his daughter, Abelard is finally pushed to speak out and resist the president through a series of complaints made to close friends. It is significant that the final straw for Abelard is not the regime's genocide of Haitians, nor its political arrests and assassinations, nor the stifling of his intellectual pursuits due to the regime's chokehold on knowledge and information, but is the implication of Jacquelyn as his daughter, and therefore himself as her father, into Trujillo's sexual politics. "It's madness! Sheer madness!" Abelard rants, "I'm the father of my household! I'm the one who says what goes!" (229). In this short spattering of sentences, Abelard manages to say quite a lot. First, he not only criticizes the regime's expectations of his compliance (already disobedience enough to get him into trouble), but he also calls the regime's entire rational integrity into question in his remark that it's "madness!" Then he declares himself as the family patriarch, logically tying that position to the right to "say what goes," which is to claim a sort of authorship, in this case, the right to dictate domestic affairs. Finally, that he should be so concerned with his patriarchal role as to reinforce it through impassioned speech implies that Abelard feels his very occupation of this position of authority, along with Jacquelyn's virginity and safety, is somehow threatened by Trujillo. And in a way, it is.

Trujillo's authority not only draws on the fear of violence, but also from deeply rooted notions of kinship relations, particularly the role of the patriarch, as suggested by Lauren Derby in her book, *The Dictator's Seduction*. Derby argues that the Dominican family structure was appropriated and used by the Trujillo regime as a means to legitimize its otherwise fragile authority in part through a system of patronage ("patronage" being

linguistically and ideologically tied with “patriarch”), in which the regime bestowed gifts, privileges, and positions onto its subjects in gestures of magnanimity to ensure their loyalties and future obligations. Trujillo thus utilized a familiar and seemingly “natural” structure as a façade for the construct of his own presidential power by “Drawing upon Catholic idioms of paternal authority,” and presenting gifts that “sought to recast Trujillo’s authority in familial terms and to euphemize the violence through which he actually maintained power” (Derby 21). As the highest authority in the Dominican Republic, Trujillo also sought to be its patriarch, the “Padres de la patria nueva (Father of the New Homeland),” and to integrate the authority of the father with the authority of the president (23). Although Abelard’s family is “not totally in the Jefe’s pocket,” they maintain their privileged status, and live comfortably despite the suffering the regime inflicts on other members of the population. However, the regime expects to be recompensed for its indulgences, as reflected “When[,] in 1937 the army had started murdering all the Haitians, [Abelard’s] father had allowed them to use his horses, and when he didn’t get any of them back he didn’t say nothing to Trujillo. Just chalked it up as the cost of doing business” (Díaz 231). But while Abelard is willing to “pay the price” to maintain his father-child, dictator-subject relationship with Trujillo, he is unwilling to pay with his daughter’s body, a body which recasts his relationship with Trujillo incompatibly as that of father-father.²

Through Trujillo’s sexual politics, the daughter’s body becomes representative of her father and his ability to function in the patriarchal role. The relationship of father and

² Unlike in the father-child or dictator-subject relationship, the father-father relationship allows Abelard to engage with Trujillo as an equal—a concept that runs counter to the regime’s elevating rhetoric. Additionally, the singular nature of the patriarchal role in a traditional family structure creates another point of contestation between Abelard and Trujillo for their “right” to Jacquelyn’s body.

daughter is, of course, related to conceptions of masculinity and femininity, with masculine performances being necessary both in defining the role of father, and to Trujillo's paternalistic claims. By styling himself as the embodiment of manhood, Trujillo could confer the authority of paternal masculinity onto the state. Because of sexuality's function in defining manhood, masculine performance was tied with sexual performance, a connection which Derby describes as "bringing respect" to Trujillo's presidential persona, and as "a key element in his legitimacy as a caudillo-turned-statesman...conjoin[ing] masculinity, authority, and legitimacy" (Derby 111). As a result of his sexual politics, female bodies, through their accumulation, public display, subjugation, and domination, became the "media for extending the male self into the world" (127). It follows, then, that the body of the daughter would serve as an extension of her father, reflecting in herself something of the male body that created and exerts its authority over her. In a historical example given by Derby, Trujillo himself seems to have recognized this symbolic relationship, and actively represented himself through his daughter, Angelita, at the 1955 Free World's Fair of Peace and Confraternity. Extravagantly dressed and paraded on display for all to see, "The fair framed the dictator's daughter as 'a charismatic center' of national value and the numinous totem of the regime, the nation, and even the 'free' world," which in turn elevated Trujillo, as the daughter, like all the achievements boasted by the regime, was *his* (109). Derby further explains that, within a patriarchal system where a man's masculinity and social standing could be defined by the "sheer number of women, particularly those of high social status, he could lay claim to," sexually "claiming" a daughter also claimed the social standing of her father (133). Abelard certainly occupies a high seat in society, and given his class, family legacy, and money, can even be seen as

representing the masculinity of the old, pre-Trujillo elite, which Derby describes as a “white, secular, liberal model of propriety of the *doctores*” (27). Trujillo’s lust for Jacquelyn, then, can be seen as a status-grab playing into a process of social legitimation, since, “Rejected by the traditional white elite as a ruthless mulatto arriviste with Haitian (black) lineage, Trujillo sought out the offspring of the bourgeoisie in his erotic forays,” and used the sexual domination of female bodies as a means of dominating their elite fathers and families (115). Trujillo’s sexual conquests added to his “symbolic capital” of male potency, further increasing his social standing (or rather, his ability to control the elites), and therefore his authority (his ability garner fear), and therefore the authority of the state, which he was perceived to embody. On this stage, to obstruct the consummation of Trujillo’s lust for a woman becomes analogous with obstructing his claims to authority and the legitimacy of his right to rule, as “refusing his attentions carried a high price and could even cost a girl’s father his job,” or in Abelard’s case, his liberty and life (112).

With the imposition of the state’s appropriated family structure, Jacquelyn’s body becomes a contested territory over which her father and Trujillo battle for the singular “right” of patriarchal authority. As his daughter, Jacquelyn is representative of Abelard and his ability to function as a father, and the contest for control over her body is representative of the contest for authority between Abelard and Trujillo. Ceding Jacquelyn to Trujillo is, for Abelard, also to cede his authoritative position of father, one of the final spaces in the intensely silenced and subjugated Dominican Republic in which he retains some ability to “say what goes.” In addition to verbal reaffirmation of his authority, Abelard also asserts his role as patriarch through action. Once he recognizes that the visibility of Jacquelyn’s body makes her vulnerable to Trujillo’s sexual gaze, Abelard takes measures to

hide her by restricting her movements in a near mimicry of the regime's restriction of *his* freedoms, "pull[ing] a Rapunzel on her ass and lock[ing] her *in*" (Díaz 217). Then, to excuse Jacquelyn's absence from presidential events, Abelard maintains the fiction that his wife (also his skilled nurse practitioner who "didn't blink when faced with arterial spray hissing from a machete-chopped arm stump") suffers from nervousness, and that his daughters must stay home to care for her (219). Socorro is none too pleased about her husband's story ("Why are you telling people that I'm loca?"), but Abelard's familiar narrative of feminine fragility and filial piety is believed for some time as a viable excuse. However, in defending his authority and his women, Abelard controls and takes female bodies as his subjects in ways similar to the regime.

Although Abelard wields his authority to protect Jacquelyn from Trujillo's violence, his authority is not completely innocent, and not without consequence to his daughter. While kept invisible, Jacquelyn is temporarily protected from assault, but her agency and freedoms are denied. This denial of agency is furthered through the restriction of knowledge about her situation, as Abelard controls the flow of information about state affairs into his household, and tells his daughter nothing of Trujillo's interest in her. Although she's unhappy with being left home from big parties, as long as she is subordinate to her father's patriarchal authority, and as long as he's the one who says what goes, she has no say over where her body is allowed to be, or where her body is allowed to be seen. By protecting his daughter, Abelard is able to redefine himself as the father of his family, but this is accomplished through methods of control that mirror the regime's restriction of freedoms, regulation of information, and use of female bodies in authoring narratives of masculine authority. I do not draw this comparison to accuse Abelard of committing

violence against Jacquelyn on the same level as Trujillo's violence against women, but because looking at the like ways in which each man's authority is produced, as well as looking at what or whom that authority is written upon, may help to explain the conflict and continuity between Abelard and Trujillo, despite the seeming disparity of power between the doctor and the president.

Despite his explicit invitation, Abelard does not allow Trujillo to lay hands on Jacquelyn, having, at the last minute before the party, "one of those epiphanies us lit majors are always forced to talk about" and leaving her home in an act of direct defiance of the Trujillo's authority (232). In doing so, Abelard decisively reclaims his disputed authoritative role as the family patriarch from the regime by "laying down the law," once again restricting his family's movements without offering them a reason, and "ignor[ing] their horrified protestations" over being unable to attend the party, effectively silencing them in his efforts to shield them from Trujillo (232). However, Abelard's power to "say what goes" in his domestic life, a power tied to his usurpation of the Trujillo's authority, is short lived, as he's arrested for authoring a speech crime against the regime shortly after that fateful party.

In the second version of the Abelard-Trujillo story (which is incredulously recounted by Yunior, but authored by the state), Abelard is officially charged with "Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President," in the form of a supposed joke drunkenly made to a group of friends regarding the possibility of bodies being stashed in the trunk of his car (233). Although it can be inferred that Abelard's arrest is motivated by his refusal to hand Jacquelyn over to Trujillo, this is not the motive legally cited by the regime. In his "confession," a word around which Yunior places quotation marks indicating

the farcical nature of the charge, Abelard concedes to having said “I hope there aren’t any bodies in here,” before opening the trunk, and “Nope, no bodies here,” after opening it (234). Yuniór notes that, while such a comment is not quite slander, it does resonate with the memory of mass murders committed by the regime during the “Hurricane” of 1931, in which “victims of the hurricane” (members of opposing political parties) were transported in the trunks of cars. The very naming of the massacre serves the purpose of announcing and normalizing the regime’s violence while at the same time euphemizing it, functions that Gordon identifies as characteristic of public secret-making. In the case of these murders, the act of naming is, in itself, proclamatory, and the word “hurricane” equates the violence of the regime to a natural, if disastrous, phenomenon, while simultaneously allowing the regime to deny responsibility for its crimes through circular logic. It wasn’t the regime that killed those people, it was the hurricane, and because it was the hurricane (a natural disaster), the regime can’t be blamed for those deaths. Yuniór offers an example of the perpetrators’ simultaneous claiming and denial of these killings in the form of a joke made about the undeniably murdered bodies: “The wind...drove a bullet straight through the head of this one” (Díaz 234). This “joke” ludicrously and indisputably shifts the blame of the killing from themselves to their weapon, to the bullet intentionally fired from their weapon, to the bullet *unintentionally* blown into the victim’s body by an unfortunate gust of wind. The way the regime speaks of and around its own actions creates the public secret—it’s clear that the regime has slaughtered its citizens, but this knowledge must not be acknowledged, and to speak the truth of what has happened is to speak a falsehood, to speak slander. However, Abelard’s joke, while perhaps “in bad taste,” does not become

slander until he speaks Trujillo's name, thus connecting the deed to the author. "Nope, no bodies here. *Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me*" (235).

Abelard's damning sentence ("*Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me.*") is what justifies to the regime his damning sentence of eighteen years of torture in Nigüa prison, a sentence that both rewrites and effaces virtually every aspect of Abelard's life. In her book, *The Body In Pain*, Elaine Scarry discusses how, in torture, the regime's "need" for information is credited as the act's pretended, if not just, motive. Scarry argues that "for every instance in which someone with critical information is interrogated, there are hundreds interrogated who could know nothing of remote importance to the stability or self-image of the regime," citing "motives" used to "justify" torture such as "the egg seller's eggs were too small" and "men...watched and applauded the television report that a military plane had crashed" (Scarry 28). This dynamic between "motive" and means is present in Abelard's trial, which, although not torture in itself, enables subsequent torture, and relies on similar dynamics of self-justification. Abelard's alleged case certainly falls into the category of inconsequential "offenses," as no regime has toppled over a drunken joke. However, the offense's inconsequentiality is, in itself, inconsequential, as Scarry points out that it's not the content of the question, but its tone and form that transforms the question into the regime's motive. This verbal aspect of torture occurs not separate from, but with the physical infliction of pain, and "turns the moral reality of torture upside down" by diverting attention from the prisoner's pain to the artificial justification of the torturer's actions (35). Abelard's inconsequential remark is treated *as if* it is consequential through his apprehension, conferring onto it the importance of a "legitimate offense," and transforming him into a criminal. Even if the motives behind his arrest are questionable, its

performance, like the naming of the “Hurricane,” serves to divert blame from the regime (in its seizure of Abelard on absurd and unjust grounds) onto Abelard (“Did he have a hand in his own destruction?”) (Díaz 242-3).

Whether or not Abelard said or did anything incriminating, the regime doesn’t give him the opportunity to defend himself, denying his ability to challenge its sentence. Abelard’s case *does* have a trial, and he *does* appear at it, but the verdict is predetermined, showing that, once again, it’s the court’s *performance* that’s most important to the regime, not the pursuit of justice. In Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline & Punish*, he describes the historic legal ceremony of sovereign states as being that which “must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime” (Foucault 35). The condemned was instrumental to producing the truth of the crime through the ritualistic and punishing violence meted out upon their body, combined with interrogative efforts to extract confessions of guilt. At the same time, the knowledge of their accused crime and the evidence gathered against them was withheld, so that “the establishment of truth was the absolute right and exclusive power of the sovereign and his judges” (35). This production of truth by the ruling powers transformed the condemned body into a text to be read, as, through the ceremonial of public punishment, it became “the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime he had committed. His body displayed...served as public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade...the sentence had to be legible for all” (43). Although Foucault describes a model of European sovereign justice, much of what he writes applies to Abelard’s fate in the Dominican Republic. The “reason” behind his arrest is withheld from Abelard, torture is employed in the process of “investigation” preceding his trial, and the production of the crime’s “truth” is completely determined by

the ruling powers, as his lawyer “got one call from the Palacio and promptly dropped the appeal,” and Abelard himself is “dragged from the courtroom before he could say a word” (Díaz 247). As in the sovereign system of justice, Abelard’s crime is held as a personal attack against the sovereign, against the “Person of the President,” against Trujillo, whose person is extended through his body of law, and as in the sovereign system, Abelard’s condemnation and punishment justified by the trial is used to reactivate Trujillo’s power (233). As an effect of his trial, Abelard’s body is transformed into text and read as guilty, as criminal, and as impotent in the face of the regime’s power to dominate and punish, and to be the singular producer of truth. However, Abelard’s case differs from Foucault’s model when it comes to the spectacle of public execution. While in the sovereign system, the punished body must be made into a public spectacle to perform as “an exercise in terror,” and be used to demonstrate “the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength,” Abelard’s torture and eventual death occurs within the private space of the prison, and his most public appearance as a condemned body is constituted by his fifteen seconds in court (Foucault 49). Instead, a different kind of terror is exercised through a spectacle of absence. The Trujillo regime terrorizes its population not just by showing its ability to commit atrocities to a body, but by showing its ability to seemingly remove bodies in their entirety from existence, allowing people just enough information to know that these bodies are attached to “crimes,” and are punished for their transgressions against the state, but obfuscating specific knowledge of the horrors that befall those bodies and letting the public imagination fill in the blanks.

The regime uses violence to transform and rewrite Abelard's very being, stripping away everything that had once defined him as a person upon his arrest, until he is reduced from a man to just another prisoner, just another suffering body. One of the first things taken is his power of speech. Upon his arrest, Abelard begs to be allowed to leave his wife a note, an appeal for authorship and agency that is denied to him. When he arrives at the prison Fortaleza San Luis, his speech is for the first time met with bodily violence: "...when he began to raise his voice about his treatment the guard typing the forms leaned forward and punched him in the face...The pain was so sudden, his disbelief so enormous, that Abelard actually asked, through clenched fingers, Why? The guard rocked him again hard, carved a furrow in his forehead. This is how we answer questions around here, the guard said matter-of-factly, bending down to be sure his form was properly aligned in the typewriter" (Díaz 239). This forcefully imposed silence is discussed in Scarry's *The Body In Pain*, where she argues that physical pain does not simply resist language "through its inexpressibility, "but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 4). Whereas Abelard's agency and ability to resist the regime has previously been expressed through language, the regime destroys his agency by employing violence to destroy his voice. Instead of "answering" Abelard's requests and complaints with its own words, the regime responds by inflicting pain on his body, which demolishes his ability to speak, question, and resist. His speech is reduced from a string of articulated complaints, to a one-word question, to unintelligible sobs, "Which the typing guard just loved" (Díaz 239).

This "love" is part of the relationship Scarry describes in her chapter on torture between the inflictor of pain (the torturer, the regime) and the victim (the prisoner), a

relationship that serves to expand the torturer's world and illusions of power (and by extension the regime they are a part of) through the diminishing of the prisoner's world and agency (Scarry 36). While as of his arrival at the prison, Abelard has yet to be subjected to "official" torture, the same dynamics that exist between the torturer and prisoner play out between him and the prison guard. In defining torture, Scarry breaks down its structure into "three simultaneous phenomena": 1) the infliction of pain, 2) the objectification of the subjective attributes of pain, and 3) the translation of the objectified attributes of pain into the insignia of power (51). Scarry defines pain as an internal process, with a reality that, though "incontestable to the sufferer," is invisible to non-sufferers outside of a handful of limited expressions that fail to accurately communicate the agony of pain (52). The external objectification of this pain through the weapon, the interrogation, the prisoner's cries, establishes the means for a "comparative display, an unfurling of world maps" between the torturer and prisoner, between the guard and Abelard, which informs the reading of the prisoner's pain as the torturer's power (36). Abelard's prison guard has a world—he sits at his desk, typing forms on his typewriter, wears a ring that doubles as a weapon when it splits Abelard's lip open, is not subject to the same kind of physical violence that he himself may inflict thanks to his position, and at the end of the day, he can go home. In contrast, Abelard is wholly displaced from his world—upon his arrival to Fortaleza San Luis, his shoes, wallet, belt, and wedding band are confiscated, depriving him of objects that had served to shape his identity as a married man of substantial economic standing, his movements are confined to the prison, the safety of his family is unknowable to him, and his speech, his final means to extend himself beyond the limits of his physical body, is destroyed in a sudden act of violence. Abelard's distress, the spectacle of his sobs

indicating pain as a direct result of the guard's actions, externalizes the sharp contrast between this having and not having, and is read by the guard not as the suffering of a fellow human being, but as his own power, the power of the regime, the power of Trujillo.

Until his death in 1960, fourteen years into his sentence, Abelard is subjected to horror after horror in Nigüa, the details of which Yuniór mostly withholds from the reader, saying "...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 250). The consequences are that Abelard as a doctor, scholar, property owner, husband, father, citizen, and person, is completely unmade. A specific torture involving a wet rope drying around his head leaves him in a vegetative state, the mental facilities he was once renowned for destroyed. "For the rest of his short life he existed in an imbecilic stupor, but there were prisoners who remembered moments when he seemed almost lucid, when he would stand in the fields and stare at his hands and weep, as if recalling that there was once a time when he had been more than this" (251). The effects of the regime's punishment on Abelard's body obliterate the contents of his mind, and with it, the person he was prior to his arrest. Through the use of imprisonment and torture, the regime has transformed him from an individual who might pose a threat in his resistance, into a body incapable of stringing together a dissenting thought. The regime pronounces him dead in 1953, seven years before his actual demise, asserting its mastery over even the forces of life and death by killing the same man twice and burying him anonymously in an unmarked grave. But the destruction of Abelard's world does not end with that of his physical body. As Yuniór notes, "...no disappearance was more total, more ultimate, than Abelard's" (247).

His house and properties are confiscated and distributed among the Trujillato, his written works are destroyed, and with the exception of his daughter Belicia, Oscar's mother born after his arrest, Abelard's wife and daughters all die before him. Socorro commits suicide a couple of months after Belicia is born, Jacquelyn is found drowned in two feet of water in her godparents' pool, and a stray bullet fired from an unknown weapon kills Astrid in church. Not only is his own life extinguished, but so too are the traces of his life, the last vestiges of Abelard's world.

An authoritarian regime going after a known dissident's family members, though cruel, is perhaps not unusual punishment. However, Yuniors points out that it *is* strange that, despite the usually suspected motivation, Trujillo never rapes Jacquelyn, even after Abelard is no longer in the picture. Instead, Trujillo seemingly goes out of his way to have the entirety of Abelard's body of work, from copies of his authored books to every scrap of paper with his handwriting on it, destroyed. Yuniors theorizes (conspiratorily) that this is a part of "another, less-known variant of the Abelard vs. Trujillo narrative," which "contends that he got in trouble because of a book" that he supposedly authored, "in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some way have been *true*" (245). While the destruction of this work at the hands of the regime obfuscates any claims to certainty about its existence, Yuniors identifies the very totality of destruction as evidence that the regime had a reason to see Abelard as a threat, or in his own words, "You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that" (246).

The question, then, is *why* the great and powerful Trujillo regime would have any reason to fear the work of one solitary scholar. What power could Abelard possibly have

over Trujillo? Perhaps it once again comes down to authorship and its capabilities. In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault recommends that the conversation about power be held not in negative terms (exclusive, reductive, etc.), but in productive ones. He argues that power “produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 194). While power is not an effect exclusively generated by the state, the state may exert disciplinary power onto its population to produce and regulate the behavior of individuals through methods of organization and surveillance. In the case of the Trujillo regime, those individuals are produced by a system of terror structured around arrest, rape, torture, disappearance, death, and constant scrutiny under the regime. They are made to comprise “a society of deaf and mute ‘sleepwalkers,’” for the knowledge that acknowledging and speaking out against the regime would get you killed or worse, and paranoid for the possibility that anyone, even your trusted friend and neighbor, could be a part of the Trujillato (Gordon 94). The production of this public body of individuals is intertwined with what both Foucault and Gordon refer to as “normalization.” Of *course* Abelard has to hand over his daughter, and of *course* there would be violent consequences if he didn’t, because that’s *the reality of the situation*—that’s just how things *are*. Violent instances that transgress the norm, “excesses” such as abductions, beatings, and killings, no longer exist because they *are made* into the new norm in the world, the reality, created by the state (76). Through these methods, the regime makes “the impossibility of living in a constant state of fear” not only possible, but a matter of fact (75). Dictators and the regimes they command are reality makers with the creative ability to produce knowledge through power and to back their power with knowledge. This ability to actualize and transform reality is based largely in authorship, ability to say what is, what was, what will be, and in

extension, what's *not*. While violence may be used by a regime to enforce a message and establish a relation of power-knowledge, violence alone does not constitute a regime. A dictator must dictate, and a state must make a statement, at least proclaiming its own existence. This creative ability is how dictators and "scribblers," Trujillo and Abelard, are connected: the creation a dictator enacts on a population is the creation an author enacts on the page. In their writings, authors create reality: they say what is, was, what will be, what's *not*, and establish relations of power-knowledge between themselves and readers. In this version of the Abelard-Trujillo story, Abelard reverses the power relation of dictator-subject by writing a Trujillo narrative incongruent with the state's narrative, and that would be difficult to control, even by means of violence, were it to enter into the popular imagination. The regime anxiously responds to the threat to its narrative by reaffirming the dictator-subject relationship through making Abelard a subject of its violence, preemptively destroying both the author and his troublesome work before they can usurp the regime's dominance.

However, the relationship between author and dictator is not limited to that between Abelard and Trujillo. As both author and narrator of his own book, Yunior is also implicated in this relationship of power-knowledge, as all the characters, including Abelard and Trujillo, are *his* subjects. Given his role of author/narrator, Yunior is expected to dictate to his reader. It is for him to say what is, what was, and what will be, and, much like Trujillo, he transforms Abelard into text (this time literal) to be read. He does, for what it's worth, seem to be aware of his position, occasionally showing his authorial hand and reminding the reader of the construction of his narrative, as he does when he admits in a footnote that he's taken artistic liberties in describing a dance that came up in the first

section of his book, or when he admits that, despite his research, he just doesn't have enough information to flesh out certain parts of his narrative, telling the reader that "if you're looking for a full story, I don't have it" (Díaz 132, 243). Through his appropriation of the academic footnote to annotate his narrative, Yunior also appropriates some of the footnote's formal authority. However, the authority of the footnote is somewhat undermined and parodied by their usual lack of "scholarly" material, sources, and tone. Literature professor T.S. Miller even goes as far as to accuse the footnotes as turning the novel "into a sort of self-annotated, self-undermining text" in his essay, "Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," implying that the footnotes weaken not only the authority of Yunior's narrative, but his authority as an author too, as Miller argues that "Yunior-as-annotator appears to take particular pleasure in deflating his alter ego," Yunior-as-author (Miller 96). Miller makes this implication explicit later in his essay, where he attributes Yunior's "self-undermining tendencies" to the fact that "Yunior's façade of unquestionable narratorial authority slips on occasion" (99). Yunior may be the narrative's author, but he "shows his hand" often enough to inform the reader that his word is not infallible, and creates room for the text to be disputed. By allowing for a degree of fallibility in his brand of reality-making, Yunior distances himself from the unquestionable certainty of the Trujillo regime's dictation.

As narrator, Yunior attempts to use his power of subject making, the authorial act of writing real-world (and by this, I mean the world within the novel) people, places, or events into textual being, to make previously invisible and silenced subjects, such as Oscar, Abelard, and Dominican history itself, visible and vocal in opposition to the socio-political forces that kept them out of sight to begin with. However, the total authority given to the

subject-maker over the subject can lead to another form of silence, that of the subject's inability to shape how it will be defined in the text. For the most part, Yuniór negotiates this violent aspect of authorship by writing primarily for characters that are dead and whose written records have been destroyed, and therefore have no means of defining themselves regardless of whether Yuniór writes on them, and would likely only be forgotten if he didn't take up his narrative project. Additionally, the ghosts of the dead, most specifically Oscar, not only grant Yuniór permission to write about them, but goad him into it, relentlessly haunting his dreams with images of blank books and knowing stares for some time before he finally gives in. But there is one principal character left alive by the end of the novel, and who is perfectly capable of telling her own story: Lola.

The chapter "Wildwood" begins with a sudden and dramatic shift in narrative tone, which can be read as Lola assuming authorial control over the text. Although Yuniór's chapters are saturated with his authorial presence, he doesn't tell his own story as much as he tells the stories of others, albeit filtered through his highly distinctive voice. In contrast, Lola's portions of the text are primarily focused on telling her own story of coming into a sense of herself, a sense that is heavily tied to her body and coded with a history of race, gender, subjection, silence, and abuse. Yuniór, whose body is situated in a different gendered context, cannot tell Lola's story for her without perpetuating these historic violences, so he instead allows his narrative voice to take a backseat for a few chapters to let Lola narrate. And take the backseat he does, as Lola's chapters feature few traces of Yuniór's authorship at all, as her pages are entirely unannotated, and he is never even mentioned by name. It is possible that Yuniór is meant to be Lola's intended reader, as he's one of the novel's only main characters that who doesn't appear in her narrative despite

being a major part of her life. This absence would make sense if Lola's writing were addressed to Yuniór, as people tend not to refer to their recipients by name, but by "you," which notably occurs at the beginning of the short Lola-narrated chapter that starts off Book II. In this chapter, Lola writes, "It felt like the deepest of treacheries to me. I wouldn't feel that again until I broke with you," implying that Lola's addressee is an ex-partner who she feels betrayed her (205). Yuniór fits this description perfectly as he both dates and cheats on Lola, and she's the one who breaks things off with him. This detail significantly re-situates Yuniór from the position of one who speaks loudly to one who listens respectively, especially to those who have been hurt, and who he has hurt in the past. And although Yuniór's narrative constitutes the bulk of the book, and although Yuniór seems to be responsible for its order and editing based on some passing comments he makes about drafts and manuscripts, it is significant that he includes these chapters, and that Lola is in control of her own narrative, and not wholly subject to Yuniór's authorship.

Having recognized the similarity between authors and dictators, and wary of authorship's capacity for violence, Yuniór tries not to let his own voice be used to replicate the violence unleashed by Trujillo in his retelling of Abelard's story, as representing his suffering at the hands of the regime risks duplicating the act of violence, as well as the regime's voice that wills it. This duplication of voice is analogous to the coercion of a confession through torture, as the prisoner's world is replaced with the torturer and regime's world, doubling "their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words" (Scarry 36). This duplication also plays a role in producing the truth of the crime. As "through the confession, the accused committed himself to the procedure...sign[ing] the truth of the preliminary investigation," so too does Yuniór risk complying with the regime's

procedure (Foucault 39). The regime “benefits” from this doubling of voice and expansion of its world, as this extends the reach of its power, even posthumously. Yuniór’s narrative is one that sets out to raise the dead, but as his words attempt to bring back Abelard, they may also raise the very regime that has killed him. However, raising the regime may not be as detrimental or immoral as it may sound, and rather, could be useful in the pursuit of justice. After all, while the Trujillo regime created a system of control through terror, it also denied this creation, formally separating itself from its violence, if only to strengthen its ties with it. The regime’s silence on its own actions protected it from accountability and intervention, and it’s by breaching this silence through accusatory words that Yuniór intervenes with his narrative and holds Trujillo liable for the destruction reined on the Dominican Republic. To let the regime lie, to let it rest in peace unexposed, is to deny peace to the lives the regime dragged down with it, so Yuniór risks dragging the regime back up in order to give Abelard’s memory some sense of justice denied to him in Trujillo’s courts.

But despite being no friend of Trujillo’s, Yuniór can’t seem to help but contribute to Trujillo literature which Derby criticizes as “reduc[ing] the regime solely to the man himself, thus buying into the image he wished to project that was so integral to the terror of Trujillo—that he was omniscient and omnipresent” (Derby 8). To his credit, Yuniór does take it upon himself to hold prominent members of Trujillo’s inner circle accountable for their misdeeds, but these short biographies are often confined to literal footnotes (whereas Trujillo’s larger than life horrors, unable to be contained within the confines of the narrative, may spill over into the footnotes and margins of the text). However, Yuniór does often conflate the body of the Trujillo with the body of the regime, and the names of both are used almost interchangeably throughout the novel. Trujillo mythos even makes its way

into Yuniór's story, as footnote nineteen, a lengthy and exceedingly prominent "aside" that sprawls across two pages, shares the details of the president's dramatic demise:

"The second shotgun blast hits Zacarías in the shoulder and he almost stops the car, in pain and shock and surprise. Here now is the famous exchange: Get the guns, El Jefe says. *Vamos a pelear*. And Zacarías says: No, Jefe, *son mucho*, and El Jefe repeats himself: *Vamos a pelear*. He could have ordered Zacarías to turn the car back to the safety of his capital, but instead goes out like Tony Montana. Staggers out of the bullet-ridden Bel Air, holding a .38 in his hand. The rest is, of course, history, and if this were a movie you'd have to film it in John Woo slow motion. Shot at twenty-seven times—what a Dominican number—and suffering from four hundred hit points of damage, a mortally wounded Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina is said to have taken two steps toward his birthplace, San Cristóbal, for, as we know, all children, whether good or bad, eventually find their way home, but thinking better of it he turned back toward La Capital, to his beloved city, and fell for the last time" (Díaz 155).

This footnote, presenting the dramatic scene of Trujillo's demise, is almost glorifying in its content. The passage's tense invests the dictator's death with the life force of the present, a quality that few other footnotes share, as the majority of them maintain the narrative's past tense. The footnote also reproduces direct dialogue from the mouth of the dictator in a moment requiring Yuniór to parrot instead of producing his own language. Finally, this passage describes Trujillo's death as valorous, heroic, and larger-than-life, as even after being shot an excessive number of times, Trujillo manages the symbolic act of facing his city, dying unlike the common man and becoming "history," part of an official and

hegemonic discourse. While the use of pop cultural references could function to destabilize that hegemony by juxtaposing “historical fact” with images and symbols from “lower down” the cultural hierarchy, these references, again, infuse this past scene with pop culture’s present vitality, and the symbolic currency these references hold in the popular imagination further adds to the mythification of Trujillo’s death. The “four hundred hit points of damage” remark (referring how much damage a video or tabletop gaming character can sustain before they die) specifically contributes to the image of Trujillo as something beyond human. While the average number of hit points a character might have depends on the game they’re situated in, four hundred hit points is a pretty high sum, and since HP generally correlates with the character’s strength Trujillo’s body is implied to be extremely formidable based on the number Yunior assigns him. Additionally, speaking of Trujillo’s injuries in terms of “hit points” and “damage” largely removes the experience of pain from his death, as tabletop and video game characters, by virtue of being fictional, are incapable of feeling pain despite the injuries they supposedly “suffer.” Although he was a real person who historically lived and died, Trujillo’s body is described as being excepted from pain and suffering, and therefore cannot be degraded by it. While Yunior’s representation of Abelard’s suffering casts his death as being pathetic and piteous, Trujillo’s seemingly impervious body dies spectacularly and becomes a thing of legend.

In addition to retelling stories about Trujillo and adding to his mythology, Yunior (or perhaps Díaz, who we’ll get to in a bit) also repeats presidential propaganda directly from *La Nación*, the national newspaper, reading: “Men are not indispensable. But Trujillo is irreplaceable. For Trujillo is not a man. He is...a cosmic force... Those who try to compare him to his ordinary contemporaries are mistaken. He belongs to...the category of those

born to a special destiny” (204). This quote from *La Nación*, situated before the start of Book II and the Abelard chapters, confers godlike qualities onto Trujillo, elevating him high above his mortal peers to that projected level of omniscience that Derby criticizes and sets out to debunk. While this quote could be problematized by the narrative’s insistence that Trujillo was just an awful, corrupt, and mortal man, at times, Yuniór does speak of the dictator as if he were a sort of “cosmic force” by comparing him to super-powered villains like the Dark Lord Sauron, and describing his “evil” as “too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily” (156). According to Yuniór, Trujillo’s power is even greater than the limits of human imagination, as he writes of Trujillo in his first footnote, “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” (2). Such a description, although acknowledging Trujillo’s repulsiveness, has some continuity with Trujillo-era propaganda, as Yuniór can’t “compare him to his ordinary contemporaries,” but must resort to finding a likeness in fantastic, superpowered villains instead.

However, even if Yuniór is not immune to “buying into” the dictator’s preferred image, he does make an effort to deface and subvert Trujillo’s image in many of his descriptions, using language much stronger and far more obscene than Abelard’s supposed slander. Yuniór takes Trujillo as his subject and rewrites the dictator’s illustrious narrative, identifying him not as a great, magnanimous, leader, but by names such as “the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface,” and with colorful descriptions along the lines of: “A portly,

sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery” (Díaz 2). In these descriptions, Yunió uses language to accentuate the physical artifice and alterations Trujillo makes to his body in order to perpetuate an image of grandeur. And by drawing attention to the construction of the dictator’s body, Yunió denaturalizes the regime’s portrayal of the president as an elevated, supreme, mega-being impervious to the mortal body’s failings and imperfections. This denaturalizing and derisive treatment is extended to the rest of the regime, as Yunió partakes in “the ‘poaching’ of meaning,” a term coined by Achille Mbembe in his essay, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” (Mbembe 6). By taking the acronym “SIM” (Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, or the Military Intelligence Service) and transforming it into “SIMians,” Yunió parodies the regime’s terminology, transforming its language to ridicule and match its members’ stupidity and brutality.

In addition to “poaching” the regime’s language, Yunió also reframes the dictator’s image through a humorous lens, adding elements of satire and parody via over the top descriptions of Trujillo and his death to the regime’s usual narrative. Daniel Bautista discusses Yunió’s exaggerative tendencies, as well as the function of genre references, in his essay, “Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz’s ‘The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,’” pointing out that “the particular mix of genres of comparisons the novel uses to recount Dominican history often creates an ironic and irreverent tone that repeatedly undercuts the more mythic elements of the story” (Bautista 46). These “mythic” elements not only apply to the Dominican Republic’s superstitions, or to the magical elements that recur in Yunió’s narrative, such as the golden mongoose or the faceless figure, but also the mythos surrounding Trujillo and his regime. While the dictator demanded a ridiculous

amount of reverence and affirmation from his subjects to create his authority, Yunió satirizes this demand by lording the dictator over with excessively elevated praise to the point of disrespect. Yunió's comparisons often play out to a similar effect, especially when comic book figures serve as referents to Trujillo, as Bautista notes that these comparisons not only elevate the dictator, but also "diminishes Trujillo at the same time by casting him as a mere comic book character. There is something literally comic and overblown about the comparison that simultaneously pokes fun at widespread Dominican beliefs about the seemingly supernatural extent of the dictator's power" (47). Similarly, comparing the dictator's demise to a scene filmed "in John Woo slow motion" makes the assassination not only recognizable to pop-culture savvy readers, but also lends it the humor of such cheesy, melodramatic productions. The footnote detailing the dictator's death also ends on several ironic notes: Trujillo's corpse is stuffed in the trunk of a car, mirroring the fates of his political opponents, Yunió provides the line "And thus passed old Fuckface" as a sort of derisive epitaph, and then proceeds to note that the road where Trujillo was gunned down "was the haunt of what El Jefe worried about the most: los maricones," or in English, homosexuals (Díaz 155). Like the Trujillo regime's own propaganda, Yunió inflates the dictator's mythos, but does so to such ridiculous extremes that the presidential persona becomes more funny than fearsome, ironically achieving the opposite of the regime's intended effect. So while Yunió may re-present and dramatize Trujillo's mythos, his strategic use of humor works to undercut and trivialize his "legacy." To an extent.

But although Yunió makes authorial moves to resist the regime's self-descriptions by rewriting them in linguistically obscene, as well as humorous, fashions, the effectiveness of this strategy as resistance is questionable. While in his book, *Rabelais and His World*,

Mikhail Bakhtin makes the claim that obscenity can be used to transform objects of power into objects of ridicule, and that it is the people's way to resist dominant culture, in "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," Achille Mbembe suggests in that obscenity is not only used by the people in reaction to power, but is rather "intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed" (Mbembe 3). Mbembe allows for Bakhtin's "not entirely invalid" claim that, "as a means of resistance to the dominant culture, and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies which undermine officialdom." However, he adds that the state is also capable of using the grotesque and obscene for its own means, and the relationship between state and subject, rather than being one of subjugation and resistance, "can best be characterized as an illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandement*³ and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space" (4). While linguistic obscenity can serve as a means of resistance, it also connects Yunior to the very authority of the regime, as the Trujillo regime was plenty obscene not just physically in its use of murder, torture, theft, and sex to procure dominance, but also symbolically, through the focus on Trujillo's body as the "principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power (7). If his "poaching of meaning" allows Yunior to resist Trujillo and the regime through a manipulation of image, it also implicates him, as he becomes "part of a system of signs that the *commandement* leaves," and if his humor aimed at the regime is funny, it's because those who would laugh have a working knowledge of the regime's horrors that allow them

³ A term Mbembe uses to "denote colonial authority, that is, in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without, of course, discussing them" (Mbembe 30).

to understand the joke, and are fluent in the *commandement's* signs (7). Through Yunior's writing, the regime's signifiers "get interpreted and reinterpreted, and feed back further significance into the system," so although though they may detest each other, the author and authoritarian dictator can't help but speak the same language (8). Even while writing about the regime in order to contradict its claims to power, the very act of writing enmeshes Yunior in the regime's imagery and signs, and his narrative lends to their currency.

To write on any subject is to give it some kind of significance, but it's important to examine how Yunior's narrative operates not solely as resistance against the regime (which has already collapsed by the time he supposedly begins to write on it), but also in the context of Abelard's imprisonment under it. While Yunior may not free himself from the regime's chain of signifiers (perhaps an impossibility when those historicized signifiers have had so much shaping power on the present), he very ability to rewrite Trujillo's image in an obscene fashion proves the regime's present impotency and death as, unlike Abelard, he faces no political consequences for doing so. While the regime's policies of secrecy demanded its subjects' silence, and while Abelard is officially imprisoned for allegedly breaching this silence, Yunior is not subject to the regime's power to punish, and is able to use his narrative as a means of exposure. Yunior writes of the regime's crimes and its denial of those crimes, revealing the regime to readers' scrutiny, the same scrutiny the regime once applied to its populace. The control of knowledge about the regime, which the regime had previously manipulated through means of propaganda, intentional leaks, secrecy, and silence, is now largely in Yunior's hands and pen, and he takes up the task of exposure that Abelard is hypothesized to have begun.

In addition to rewriting the regime's image, Yuniors also uses his authorial abilities to select which acts and aspects of the regime to represent or obscure in his narrative, and employs these choices to check scenes of the regime's power. While Yuniors exposes, he also omits, not to spare or censor the regime, but to spare Abelard and the reader from scenes of the regime's punishing power. One of the most notable examples of this of this is the purposeful omission of scenes depicting Abelard's torture. Yuniors indicates his knowledge of these scenes by informing his reader that he could tell "a thousand tales to wring the salt from your motherfucking eyes," but makes the choice to leave these tales untold in favor of leaving the reader "with only the consequences" (250). There are many instances of narrative silence in *Oscar Wao*, and in his essay, "Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and 'the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,'" Sean P. O'Brien attempts to differentiate textual omission from erasure, claiming that each has its own distinct function. O'Brien characterizes erasures as areas in the text marked as "_____" or "-----", and argues that they don't "downplay the significance of the absent content," but "create a catchall answer/explanation only to withhold it," calling the readers' attention to the absent content. Omission, on the other hand, which is by definition unmarked and represented by printed text, is "more effective than erasure at downplaying content" (O'Brien 82). Yuniors's recounting (or lack of recounting) of Abelard's fate has characteristics of both erasure and omission, since Yuniors both refrains from reproducing the scene of torture, yet draws attention to the scene's absence by prefacing its omission. Torture, in its injustice, violence, and mere occurrence, is not a subject to be "downplayed" or written off as inconsequential. Yet reproducing the scene of torture through text invites the reader to gaze upon and confirm the regime's punishing power, playing into the

regime's tropes of violence as spectacle. By calling attention to Abelard's torture, then choosing to omit depictions of the act, Yuniór negotiates the task of exposing the regime's violent, denied crimes, and authorship's capacity to reproduce and present those crimes through text.⁴

Instead of the scene of torture, what Yuniór presents is Abelard, bringing his body out of obscurity despite the regime's best efforts to render him and his life invisible. In the section of his book devoted to Abelard, Yuniór participates in what Walter Benjamin terms in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as "blasting a specific life out of the era" in a "fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin 263). Benjamin describes this historiography as being "based on a constructive principle" that involves stopping over certain parts of the historical configuration and "shocking" them, pulling them out of that configuration and imparting them with elevated significance (262). The world that the regime had attempted to destroy all traces of is traced on the pages of Yuniór's narrative and, unlike Abelard's court case, has found an advocate in Yuniór. Rather than being subsumed into statistics,

⁴ However, whether or not Yuniór similarly "writes around" scenes of torture and abuse featuring Hypatía Belicia Cabral, Abelard's youngest daughter, is another question. Like her father before her, Beli is also horribly beaten by the regime's men, though unlike her father she lives through the ordeal. More significantly, unlike her father, she is a pregnant black woman, and her body connotes a different kind of violence. The significance of sexuality in her story, in addition to the sexual motivations behind her beating (she's pregnant with her lover's child, and he's the husband of Trujillo's sister) adds elements of sexual violence to Beli's body that are absent from Abelard's. While Yuniór largely omits the scene of her beating in the cane field in favor of reporting her injuries, much like he does with Abelard's torture, a similar style of narration may not suffice for such a dissimilar situation. Like her older sister, Jacquelyn, Beli's gendered body situates her within a tradition of female subjectivity and subjugation in which Yuniór, as an author, is also implicated. An adequate conclusion to the question of whether or not Yuniór's narration of Beli is exploitative requires a careful reading of Belicia's portion of the book. However, this paper cannot do such a reading justice given its subject and scope. As it stands, I can now only write on Yuniór's use of omission in regards to Abelard as his subject, while acknowledging that this reading may not be applicable to his narrative treatment of Belicia.

into another one of the many unmarked graves dug by the regime, Abelard regains his name and identity through the reconstruction of Yuniór's chronicle, through Yuniór's "blasting" of his life. Of course, Yuniór's not quite writing a "real" history, as Abelard is not a "real" person who ever existed, but a fictional character within a novel that has no physical body to be made to vanish or reappear. Even Yuniór, despite his self-proclaimed authorship, cannot be the author of anything because he too is a fictional character written by Junot Díaz, a corporeal person, and the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

All claims of authorship made by the book's fictional characters are similarly fictional, as it's Junot Díaz who has ultimately written these characters and their lines of dialogue. Yuniór is not the author of the novel, but a fictional character that Díaz wrote to makes claims of authorship. Because the character is fictional, Yuniór's authorial deferrals, omissions, and confessions are also fictions, as most of the events and characters participating in them had no real-world referent to begin with. "Yuniór" himself does not exist as a real body (and I mean "a real body" here as one that is composed of flesh, blood, and bones, with skin that can be physically felt, and that has the capacity to live and die), but as a body of text authored by Díaz, and read, if not believed, by the novel's readers. This quality of bodilessness with no "real body" correlation off the page is shared by most of the novel's main characters (Yuniór, Oscar, Abelard, Belicia, and Lola among them), who similarly lack the capacity to author, suffer pain, live, or die. They are all fictional so far as they do not have a referent grounded in the corporeal world, but their fictionality does not imply complete non-existence, only a non-corporeal existence. Yuniór may not exist as a "real body," but he does exist as a fictional representation of what a real body *might* do, say,

or author, and it is through this representative fiction that readers can engage with the function of authorship.

Although it's Díaz, not Yunió, who is the "true" author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz's "real body" does not appear in the text, nor could it, by way of Foucault's argument in his 1969 essay, "What Is An Author?" since "Everyone knows that, in a novel offered as a narrator's account, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly to the writer or to the moment in which he writes but, rather, to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work" ("What Is an Author?" 215). By including this quote, I do not mean to suggest that "Yunió" is Díaz writing under a pen name, or that his character functions strictly as Díaz's alter ego, as the textual evidence necessary to support this claim would be significantly lacking. Instead, what I wish to point out is that, while the "real bodied" Junot Díaz physically authored his work, that same "real bodied" Díaz is necessarily absent from the text. Writing (and language as a whole) is obviously representative, and while it can reference physical, corporeal things, it can never reproduce them in their entirety. So while Díaz is positioned as "the author" of the novel, he is simultaneously barred from fully entering into his text, and if he's "in it" at all, it's only through the invisible, organizing force that is the broad concept of Díaz as "the author." In dealing with the dilemma of "the author" as a person, name, quality, context, occupation, and status, Foucault finds it productive to forego many of these characteristic traits and "deal solely with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this figure that, at least in appearance; is outside it and antecedes it," texts which have, as he terms it, an "author function" (205). As the term suggests, the author function is less concerned with *who* the author of a text is, but

with *how* the perception of the author affects readings of the text. In works of fiction, the author often functions as a point of reference, perceived to exist outside the text and in the “real world.” In this way, they help maintain the separation between “fiction” and “reality,” as readers can perceive that while the work exists within the realm of fiction, the author must exist within the realm of reality. However, while Díaz’s presence in his novel is largely invisible, he draws explicit attention to the author function through writing Yuniór’s loud and frequent claims to authorship.

Díaz uses Yuniór to complicate the seemingly dichotomous relationship of the real and the fictional through his character’s function as author. If the author is supposed to be a position that exists in the “real world outside the text,” then what happens when that position is brought into the fiction itself? The boundaries between the perceived real and the perceived fictional become obscured, or rather, are exposed as being less fixed and more permeable than previously imagined. The position of authorship Yuniór claims is as fictional as he is, by the logic that the book he claims to have “written” does not exist, and therefore can have no author. (Additionally, Yuniór’s “book” is not *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which is authored by Díaz, and composed of sections not only “authored” by Yuniór, but also by Oscar’s sister, Lola.) As Yuniór’s authorship is a fiction, so too is the right of authority attached to the role of authorship. Although he seems to exert the authority to dictate to readers what happens or doesn’t happen in “his” narrative, it is, of course, Díaz who has written this novel and Yuniór into existence, and who actually dictated what happens or doesn’t happen, and what is said or isn’t said in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* before the book was published and printed. If Yuniór’s fictional

authority is to be believed as his own *real* authority, then readers become subjected by a fiction.

As a written fiction, Yunió demonstrates how authorship and authority can be rooted in, and substantiated by, fictions, and that the delineation between the real and the imagined can be confused. Through the medium of the novel, Díaz is able to situate fact (the history of the Dominican Republic, Trujillo and his regime, people, places, and events with real-world referents) and fiction (Yunió, Abelard, Oscar's life, the apparitional faceless man, the events of the novel) on the same stage, allowing them to engage with and influence perceptions of each other. If writers and dictators are alike, and Yunió is a fictional author whose authority is dubious, then qualities of that dubiousness and fiction must in some way carry over to Trujillo's authority too. While the human crimes and violence Trujillo and his regime committed are painful facts, much of the self-styling, propaganda, and claims to authority that in many ways precipitated these crimes and acts of violence were based in fictions made powerful by their currency in the popular imagination and the confusion of the real and the fictional. By writing a fiction of his own, Díaz is able to engage with the overwhelmingly real (yet often seemingly unreal) horrors of the Trujillo regime's history, much of which is unknown to US readers (as is Yunió's accusation at the beginning of the novel), or consists of accounts that glut the president's person with excessive power (as is Derby's criticism of Trujillo discourse). By linking "writer and dictators" as similar, and by calling so much attention to the author function which he himself is implicated in, Díaz's novel challenges conventional forms of knowledge regarding the integrity of structures power relations are built upon.

In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon quotes Michael Taussig's claim that "All societies live by fictions taken as real" (Gordon 80). Historically, the Trujillo regime created and made use of such fictions to substantiate its claims to authority and power. Trujillo was not infallible, but he made believe that he was. The regime was not natural, but it made believe that it was. And through the mechanisms of arrest, torture, rape, disappearance, and mass murder, the people of the Dominican Republic were also made to believe. The authority of the Trujillo regime was a meticulous work of fiction that asserted itself as undeniable fact, a fiction with such potency that it outlives its referents in the form of the popular myths and legends surrounding Trujillo. Through the fiction of Yuniors authorship and the fiction of Abelard, his encounter with Trujillo, and his persecution under the regime, the operation and functions of the fictions that upheld the regime (the fiction of racial superiority authenticated by the Haitian genocide, the fiction of paternal authority authenticated by the subjugation of female bodies through sexual domination, the fiction of a speech crime authenticated by the word of the courts and the violence inflicted upon Abelard's body, the fiction of Trujillo as a supreme being authenticated through the elimination of contradictory voices and narratives) are revealed. By virtue of its being a work of fiction that takes history as its subject, *Oscar Wao* is able to dispute and raise questions about the reality or fictionality of this history by blurring these distinctions in a way similar to how the regime blurred the distinctions between reality and nightmare through its reign of terror and violence. Of works of fiction that take on state violence as its subject matter, Gordon suggests that "fiction can more easily establish an unreality principle better to understand certain elements of what Jean Franco so aptly terms the 'violence of modernization' in the complicated neoimperialism that characterizes Latin America" when

“the official documents can go no further” (81). Derby echoes this thought in her history of the Trujillo regime, writing, “the terror was so appalling that it has been described more readily in literature than in history” (Derby 3). Fiction, then, through the liberties allowed to its representative functions, has the ability to engage in emotionally resonant, if not wholly official or factual, truth-making. If, as Gordon claims, “the exercise of state power...involves controlling the imagination,” then it must vie for dominance over this imaginative territory with the many fictions authors generate, and that may contradict the state’s narrative. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is one such fiction that challenges the Trujillo regime’s narrative, as well as the knowledge, history, and myths produced around it, for dominance in the popular imagination. None of this is to say that authorship itself is, by any means, strictly a force of “good.” Like an authoritarian regime, authors exert authority through subject making, a process that can be used for, or result in, violence. Authorship can be used to perpetuate oppressive states, along with their symbols and narratives. But although they are alike in many ways, it’s also this likeness that allows authors to recognize and condemn the violence operates within authoritarian narratives, and that allows their oppositional ideas to catch in the popular imagination, gaining social currency and force, which can then inspire change.

However, the creative power of authorship has its limits. Díaz’s novel cannot revive the victims of Trujillo’s regime any more than Yunior can restore Abelard, Jesús de Galíndez, or the Mirabal sisters, or anyone else murdered by the regime, to life. The regime’s damage has been done, and history and time compel the counterspell of Yunior’s words to wear off, something that he realizes and laments, saying, “I wish I could stay in this moment, wish I could extend Abelard’s happy days, but it’s impossible” (Díaz 236). No

matter how much Yuniór, or Díaz, want to, authorship is incapable of saving anyone from the real experience of suffering, nor is it capable of undoing all of the regime's imposed silences, despite the volume of language it employs. No matter how many words Yuniór puts on the page, he can't seem to fill the gaps in this past narrative, admitting that "on all matters related to Abelard's imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction" (243). The silence "stands monument." It is its own kind of structure; it's own kind of remembrance of what has happened; its own unseen and undeniable proof—yet it stands to obstruct narrative reconstruction and memory, posing an unsolvable riddle to any would-be storyteller. The bodily pain, that which Scarry claims is the destruction of language, the suffering, the waste, cannot be reconstructed by any amount of language, and so there is silence. Although he provides some possible explanations for Abelard's destruction, an accident, a conspiracy, or a *fukú* (curse), the silence prevents Yuniór from making any definitive statement about *why* what happened to Abelard happened, and he cedes his authorial power to the reader, saying "you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here" (243).

"Trawling in silences" sounds like a futile task, but it's not completely without hope. Rather, it is done out of the hope that there is something within silence that may yet be salvageable, that may yet speak and be heard by others. In his same essay on the philosophy of history, Benjamin writes, "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably," to be lost to silence if not recognized and pulled out of oblivion by the present, in this case, by Yuniór,

and by extension, Díaz (Benjamin 255). If writing “an image of the past” is a way of pulling its concerns into the present, then reading can be a form of recognition and awareness.

Yunior writes his narrative to appease the ghosts that haunt him, and considers the act of writing as a kind of *zafa* (counterspell) to his own *fukú*, but what he intends to do with his book after finishing it is never made explicitly clear.⁵ However, it is significant that Yunior at times writes his book in the form of an address, making ample use of the “you” pronoun. While “you” is sometimes used as a rhetorical device as a substitute for the more formal “one,” there are multiple occasions where Yunior’s text engages with a “you” that is presumably the reader, such as when he explains his inability to provide a complete story, or when he calls “you” out for being ignorant about Dominican history. It’s unlikely that this “you” is an address to the self, as certain references to “you” anticipate that they will have a reaction to the subject material different from Yunior’s, or that they are lacking specific knowledge that Yunior can reveal to them. Yunior also makes assumptions about what kind of reader “you” is—someone without much of a grasp of Dominican history and culture, someone who wouldn’t know Oscar or his family, and someone who craves a complete and satisfying narrative. While it’s clear that Yunior is writing this book for Oscar and for himself, the assumptions he makes about his reader suggest that he’s also writing for someone whose life experience is different from the lives he describes, and that it’s important for these marginalized stories to be recognized, not just by those who inherit

⁵ A couple of the footnotes provide contextualizing hints as to how Yunior’s text fits into his “real world.” Footnote 15 uses the word “manuscript” to refer to the narrative, implying that Yunior may intend to publish his book, and footnote 17 confirms the existence of earlier drafts of Yunior’s text that may be significantly different from the version readers are able to see.

these histories, but also by people who they are not directly about.⁶ Remembering and recognizing, then, become the work of readers as well as writers.

In one of his final chapters, Yuniór, recognizing that his narrative is nearing its end, that the past is catching up with the present, makes a prediction for the future of Lola's daughter, Isis. In this future, she will "come [to him] looking for answers," and Yuniór will show her the refrigerators in which he keeps Oscar's books, games, manuscripts, and papers, and he'll let her stay with his family for "As many [nights] as it takes" (Díaz 330). In keeping Oscar's things for Isis, Yuniór holds onto the hope that "maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (330-331). Yuniór recognizes that all he has written and done is not enough to fill the silences and soothe the pain of the past and present, so he entrusts his hopes to a future reader who will put time and effort into an attempt to understand the past, and perhaps learn something from it. And like those manuscripts waiting in Yuniór's fridge, Díaz's book holds a similar potential. As a novel written about a past both fictional and real, *Oscar Wao* presents an account of how an authoritarian regime laid claim to power through means of violent inscription and subjugation of female, black, and suffering bodies, silencing and denying agency to both, and through its narrative, the novel uses the position of authorship as a means to condemn this historic violence. The effects of the Trujillo regime's overwhelming violence do not die with their victims, and like the *fukú* that hangs over Oscar's family, the "fallout," as Yuniór calls it, is inherited by future generations through continued violence, memory, absence,

⁶ Of course, nobody is completely detached from these histories or people. As Yuniór notes about the *Fukú americanus*: "we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not" (Díaz 2).

and silence. But, like an addendum to that awful inheritance, the novel offers future readers a way of thinking about and understanding past horrors, knowledge that may serve as a counterspell against future injustice. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* may be the product of “scribblers” whose brand of authorship shares many similarities with a tyrant’s authority, but unlike Trujillo’s dictatorship, the novel disputes the absolute sovereignty of its own authorship, its ability to provide a complete narrative, and provokes its readers to make their own executive decisions regarding which parts of its fiction to take as true.

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