Reinterpreting the Diaspora and the Political Violence of the Trujillo Regime: The Fantastic as a Tool for Cultural Mediation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Reinterpreting the Diaspora and the Political Violence of the Trujillo Regime: The Fantastic as a Tool for Cultural Mediation in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Diana Pifano

1 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a true palimpsest. Thematically, this novel brings together the fantastic with the ruthlessness of the Trujillo regime and the experience of the Dominican diaspora. On a linguistic level it is no less complex; written in both English and Spanish, the text is speckled with code-switches, bilingual word play and humour. Moreover, The Brief Life can be considered a historiographical novel, and also a coming of age story where the protagonist’s journey serves as a vehicle for the tale of his family’s fukú; a curse that has plagued them for three generations, resulting in their devastation at the hands of the dictatorship.

2 This essay undertakes a comprehensive examination of the fantastic elements of The Brief Life, arguing that their principal function is to mediate the cultural discrepancies underlying this multifarious narrative; discrepancies which result from the incomprehensible violence of the Trujillo regime and the Dominican diaspora in the United States. It is important to clarify that two categories of elements related to fantasy and the fantastic can be distinguished in the novel, based on their origin and contribution to the denouement of the plot. The first is a large number of intertextual references to the genres of fantasy literature, science fiction, comic books and popular culture. While they do not constitute fantastical occurrences, these references establish a framework that contributes to the reader’s interpretation and acceptance of those elements that truly are fantastic. The second category corresponds to a series of supernatural events within the plot, which make up the fantastic content of the novel per se, and which are
closely related to the autochthonous culture of the Dominican Republic. These events are associated with the curse known as fuko - the unifying thread among the characters belonging to the Cabral family and the novel’s leitmotif. In what follows we explore these two categories and their relationship to each other and the rest of the text, in order to describe how, together, they serve to mitigate the author’s representation of the atrocities of the island nation’s violent history.

This novel’s rich heterogeneity has set Junot Díaz apart from a growing group of talented Dominican-American authors and garnered him the attention of the academy. Five years after its publication, numerous scholars have engaged in a wonderfully productive dialogue about this text. Considering the range of their contributions, we will limit our discussion to proposals that examine the novel’s relationship to the fantastic, fantasy literature, science fiction, and comic books – noting that the various authors do not make the same type of distinctions between the fantastic and the genres as we do here. The essential contribution of this essay is that it explores all of the previously mentioned categories. Until now, critics have frequently disassociated the intertextual references and the fantastic from each other and from the other discourses operating within the text – humour, historiography, literary history, and popular culture –, failing to consider the outcome of their interactions. In fact, many articles exalt the significance of one genre, mode or discourse above the others, ignoring their collective effect. As a result, the valuations of these contributions differ greatly, as do the theoretical approaches to this novel.

While most authors recognize the importance of one or more of these elements, much of their attention is devoted to what we have categorized as intertextual references. Therefore, we must begin our discussion by recognizing that these allusions abound throughout the novel and that they serve the primary purpose of characterizing the protagonist. Being over-weight and socially isolated, Oscar finds pleasure in life through his love of these genres. He is an outcast in both Hispanic and North American cultures: too much of a ghetto-nerd to fit in with his American peers, too awkward to be recognized as a sleek, womanizing Dominican tiguere. Comic books, fantasy literature and science fiction films are Oscar’s refuge.

Efraín Barradas argues that despite their constant presence, sci-fi and fantastic literature are neither the aesthetic foundation of the novel, nor do they establish a pact of verisimilitude (106). This article will demonstrate how these references perform important functions within the narrative, both thematically and formally. However, it is important to acknowledge that neither fantasy literature nor science fiction are the principal discourse in this novel but rather they are two of many which contribute to the story’s rich meaning. A reading that chooses to focus only on the historiographical aspects of the text and casts aside its numerous intertextual allusions is limited. If one aspires to a comprehensive interpretation of The Brief Life, each of these elements must be taken into account. Ideally both critic and reader will engage with both the intertextual references and, most importantly, the fantastic elements of the narrative. The latter category includes: that the Dominican Republic is a magical space where supernatural events take place; that a curse dating back to the discovery of America leads to the Cabral family’s destruction and to Belicia and Oscar receiving brutal beatings; that one of the triggers of the family’s fuko is a lost manuscript written by Abelard Cabral in which he describes the supernatural force behind Trujillo’s regime; that La Inca, the family’s matriarch, saves Belicia’s life through her prayer; that several members of the family
have powerful and accurate premonitions; and that towards the end of his life, Oscar’s
love for the prostitute Ybón is reciprocated.

In contrast to Barradas, there are authors who have explored and valued the role of the
fantastic in the novel, yet they have failed to explore its associations with the social and
the historical. Such is the work of T.S. Miller, who considers fantasy and science fiction
fundamental components of this text, recognizing the diversity of discourses at play in
the novel. However, his article constitutes a reflection on the ways in which *The Brief Life*
differs from the traditional models of the science fiction genre, examining the novel’s
autochthonous themes. Other authors, who approach the novel from a purely literary
perspective, have often identified the supernatural elements of the plot as references to
Latin America’s rich cultural heritage, linking them to the magical realist style of Alejo
Carpentier, Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. The most persuasive
argument is presented by Daniel Bautista, who proposes that Díaz’ novel constitutes an
adaptation of the magical-realist genre, which has evolved to include the discourses of
comic books, and science fiction and fantasy literature. Because it explores the various
discourses at play in this text, Bautista’s proposal has been influential in moulding my
thoughts on this novel.

Having considered the related literature, I will now describe how the intertextual and
fantastic elements of this novel function together as a tool for cultural mediation, and
how their primary function is to serve as a pragmatic device that allows Díaz to present a
(re)interpretation of Dominican history and the diaspora.

**Fantasy as an auxiliary narrative**

A point of agreement in many existing analyses of this novel revolves around the way in
which the innumerable references to fantasy literature, science fiction, comics and
general pop-culture serve a descriptive function. In particular, they describe cultural and
historical elements specific to the Dominican Republic of the Trujillo era. When asked
about these references in an interview by Armando Celayo and David Shook, Díaz
explained they were the reference system that allowed him to breach the cultural gap
between the two worlds he presents in the novel. Díaz explained how these discourses
“are meant to do this kind of stupid stuff, they’re meant to talk about these extreme,
ludicrous transformations” (15). The author clarified that he was initially drawn to
fantasy and science fiction when he encountered a “world barrier” which impeded the
flow of his narrative between the Dominican Republic of the Trujillato and the United
States of the 1970’s. This same cultural discrepancy is also addressed in a footnote:

Where [Oscar’s] outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know.
It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or
of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly
wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey – a single green card shifting not only worlds
(from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of
both). After a transition like that I’m guessing only the most extreme scenarios
could have satisfied (21).

The impediment to which Díaz alludes is in fact the cultural incongruences derived from
the contact zone created by the diaspora - to borrow the term coined by Mary-Louise
Pratt. Within the novel, those intertextual references aid in the description of the
disparate components of the narrative universe. They act together to form an auxiliary
narrative – a secondary reference system – that addresses the cultural differences born of the encounter of Dominican and American culture in terms that are more accessible to the reader. In short, the framework created by those references, or the gestalt of knowledge to which they allude, acts as the supplementary language that allows for the diaspora and all its complexities to be (re)presented to a reader lacking any previous knowledge of the matter.

The most salient example are the descriptions of the historical figures related to the regime, all of whom are characterized by association to the genres’ famous villains. For example: Johnny Abbes García is touted as “one of Trujillo’s Mogul Lords. Chief of the dreaded and all-powerful secret police (SIM). (110)” ; Félix Wenceslao Bernardino is described as “[O]ne of Trujillo’s most sinister agents, his Witchking of Angmar (120)” ; and of course the best example is the description of the dictator himself, “[h]e 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 (4)” . In fact, the most clear and concise description of the regime is presented by means of pop-culture. In a section entitled “Santo Domingo Confidential” the Trujillato is compared to an episode of the Twilight Zone, in which a boy

 [...] with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world ... [he] is vicious and random and all the people in the ‘community’ live in straight terror of him, denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat in order not to be the person he maims or, more ominously, sends to the corn. (After each atrocity he commits [...] the horrified people of Peaksville have to say, It was a good thing you did, Anthony. A good thing.) (224).

The metaphor is clear: like the people of Peaksville, Dominicans lived in fear of the regime, ever guarded against the betrayal of their countrymen. Furthering the similarities, the novel is full of examples of characters being forced to praise Trujillo. Let us recall the epigraph taken from La Nación, which opens the second section of the novel: “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). Another small Caribbean variation is that the characters from the television program are exiled to a cornfield, while the Cabrals are sent to the sugarcane fields.

An interesting corollary of this resource is that the references at play are specific to modern North American culture and are most easily recognized by Anglophone readers. While other readers, namely Dominican and other Hispanic readers, seem to possess no such knowledge. We can establish such a distinction because this group of references had to be explained through footnotes when the novel was translated into Spanish. In the outstanding translation by Achy Obejas, she includes both Díaz’s original footnotes and a sub-category of annotations in order to fill in the gaps of the Hispanic / hispanophone reader’s competence. For example, when the concept of fukú is introduced, its inexorable effect is equated to the ruin of Morgoth (5). While no explanation is given in the original English text, the translation includes a footnote explaining how this reference alludes to The Children of Hurin by Tolkien and is accompanied by a lengthy quote from that novel in which Morgoth curses Hurin and his children (5). While the intended, Anglophone, reader can presumably understand the novel’s abundant code switches between English and Spanish, we can infer that he or she lacks a basic knowledge of Dominican history, and therefore, the viability of intertextual references as auxiliary narratives is tied to cultural competence but is unrelated to linguistic competence.
The fantastic in the novel is closely related to the customs and beliefs of the Dominican Republic, specifically the *fukú*. The correlation between the curse and the Dominican sphere of the narrative universe is presented in the introductory chapter and elaborated upon throughout the novel:

> It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond. If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fuá*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, *fuá*, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you, *fuá*, the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow. [...] And what about fucking Kennedy? He was the one who green-lighted the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, who ordered the CIA to deliver arms to the Island. Bad move, cap’n. (3)

The Cabral family’s past, from the grandparent’s downfall to the events leading up to Oscar’s death, is illustrated with the help of a series of recurring supernatural elements related to the *fukú*: a mongoose with golden eyes, which appears when a member of the family is in mortal danger; a faceless man that signals the *fukú’s* imminent wrath; a cane field that comes to life claiming Belicia and Oscar as its victims; a series of dreams and premonitions; and finally, the “numinous power of prayer” as performed by Oscar’s grandmother, La Inca, to protect her loved ones. Overall, the island is a magical space where the fantastic flourishes: “What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more *fukú*?” (6).

The primary function of these autochthonous/supernatural elements is that they serve to mitigate the atrocities and violence involved in the representation of the Trujillo regime. The faceless man, the cane fields and the premonitions, are associated with the wrath of the *fukú*, while the golden mongoose and La Inca’s prayers form part of the counter curse, which facilitates the description of some of the most painful and violent events in the novel. At moments when the dramatic tension is at its highest, the irruption of the supernatural provides a buffer that assuages the gruesome details of the Cabral family’s tragedies.

The most salient example occurs in the third chapter, where two officers of Trujillo’s Secret Police kidnap Belicia as punishment for having taken one of the dictator’s brother-in-laws as a lover. They drive her to a sugarcane field outside the city and beat her nearly to death. She suffers a long list of injuries: fractures to her clavicle, five ribs, a triple fracture of her right arm, contusions to her kidneys and liver, a collapsed lung; several of her teeth are torn out and she requires a total 167 stitches. Additionally, the narrator expresses uncertainty as to whether the pregnant Belicia is also raped. When she regains consciousness, the young girl sees a golden-eyed mongoose that speaks to her with a foreign accent. She struggles to move but the sugarcanes pull her back cutting her hands and thighs, drowning her with their sweet scent (150). The magical creature guides her out of the field and towards the road where she is rescued. For a second time we encounter an occurrence of *deus ex machina*, and Belicia is rescued from certain death.

The fantastic breaks the dramatic tension of this gruesome account through juxtaposition: the savagery of the beating is seen in contrast to the benevolence of the mongoose, the factual denouncement of the Secret Police and the regime are intertwined with the character’s fictional salvation, and the seriousness of this tragedy, which occurs...
in an enchanted space, is brought to a conclusion by means of a magical creature. The tone of the event is changed by the presence of the supernatural but the pragmatic influence of the discourse goes beyond the section that describes the beating. Despite the fragmented narration of the novel, the description of Belicia’s assault is framed by a repeated questioning of the veracity of the curse. The section that precedes it, entitled “La Inca, The Divine”, describes how after confirming that the girl was indeed pregnant, the matriarch’s undertakes a colossal effort to protect her daughter by virtue of prayer:

Shrugging off her weariness, she did what many women of her background would have done. Posted herself beside her portrait of the Virgen de Altagracia and prayed. We postmodern plataneros tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the olden days, but it’s exactly at these moments, when all hope has vanished, when the end draws near, that prayer has dominion (144).

Moreover, after Belicia’s injuries are outlined, a new paragraph prefaces the appearance of the mongoose. Here the narrator explains that the reader has reached: “[t]he strangest part of [this] tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Belicia’s wracked imagination or something else altogether [he] cannot say” (149). This leads the reader to once again exercise his or her own judgment in regards to the curse. The section that follows the description of the beating, “Fukú vs. Zafa”, questions whether Belicia’s salvation should be seen positively and attributed to a zafa, or whether the beating should simply be counted as one more event precipitated by the family fukú, the underlying reason for all of the Cabral’s misfortune. The narrative voice’s comments cast a veil of vagueness over the account. In true post-modern fashion the narrator oscillates between establishing the veracity of the supernatural and allowing for its dismissal. Consequently, the reader is given license to question the entire episode. The fantastic provides certain distance between these repugnant events – which ultimately represent a historical reality - and the episode, as part of a work of fiction. As a result it facilitates the representation of incomprehensible violence to a reader who, we have already determined, has no previous knowledge of the regime.

A similar sequence occurs again decades later, during Balaguer’s third government, when Oscar is kidnapped by a pair of modern-day policemen whom he dubs Grod and Grundy - both super villains from DC comics. Many of the elements we encounter during the description of the attack on Belicia are duplicated in this account, motivating the reader’s recognition and further questioning of the fukú. Although the curse is never mentioned explicitly, it is easy to infer that Oscar is destined to suffer its wrath when he is taken to the magical cane field and receives a similar, equally savage beating. While recovering, he has a vision of the golden-eyed mongoose similar to the one his mother had decades before. Even the reason for the attack is comparable: Oscar has fallen in love with the girlfriend of a powerful member of the Secret Police. Another indirect allusion to the curse is the appearance of the faceless man, whom Oscar momentarily believes has joined Grod and Grundy as they hit him. This element is absent from the account of Belicia’s beating but appears throughout the novel at moments when the curse is about to exert its power over the family. For example, when Abelard’s wife, Socorro, senses that her husband and children are in danger, she sees him standing over their beds, and when Belicia becomes pregnant she sees him standing on the side of the road.

An important difference between the two episodes is related to the cultural background of the characters. During the assault Belicia fantasizes that her lover will come rescue her from the secret police, while Oscar imagines US Marines will emerge from the sugarcane
to save him. To use the terms employed by Díaz in the novel’s introduction, Oscar is more McOndo than Macondo (7). Mother and son are separated by a generation, but more importantly they are the product of their culture and life’s experiences. While Belicia is described as an “Old World Dominican mother” (55), Oscar represents the children of the Dominican diaspora; his upbringing, his reference system and his language are hybrid.

However, the most significant difference between Oscar and Belicia’s beatings appears in the portion of the text describing the assault on him, where the supernatural is presented as factual. Oscar’s visions are described as dreams; he remembers having dreamt that he spoke to the mongoose, and while being unconscious for three days he had marvellous dreams he later forgot. Here, the narrative voice is much less ambiguous with regards to the veracity of the supernatural and the recurring elements are presented as probable, even reasonable products of Oscar’s mind. In fact, when they learn of Oscar’s critical condition La Inca and Belicia pray together but even then, neither the characters nor the narrator mention any similarities between past and present (301).

Past events, which have occurred in the old country and are associated with the regime, are described as being inexplicable, while more recent events are rationalized and presented factually, even though they are no more verifiable. Despite their similarities, memories are associated to the fantastic, while the experiences of the second generation are not. This distinction is attributable to the narrative voice of Yunior, who like Oscar and Lola has had no direct experience of the Trujillato but rather forms part of an imagined community – the Dominican diaspora in the United States – that has created a collective memory surrounding the dictator’s reign. In this vein, the information the narrator has gathered from the collective is understandably impregnated by autochthonous influences and the supernatural, while the events he does witness, or those for which he presumably receives a first person account, are not.

It is important to remember Yunior is a testimonial narrator who is not omniscient and therefore cannot account for all the events of the novel. He is often denied information, either by one of the Cabrals, or by historical circumstance. His limited knowledge of the Dominican Republic and the regime are brought to light throughout the text. He often acknowledges the information provided by a larger community that includes his own family and several friends. One footnote explains how a friend named Leonie – “resident expert in all things Domo” (132) – corrected the narrator’s initial choice of location for Belicia and El Gangster’s beach getaway, as the locale he had chosen has no beaches, only rivers. The text demonstrates that his representation of past events is the flawed product of memories and accounts shared with him by a collective. The supernatural is the language that allows for this collective memory to be reinterpreted and represented in a way that is comprehensible to the reader, much in the same way as the framework of intertextual references allows for the interpretation of the cultural complexities of the diaspora. Ultimately, the violence of the Trujillato is one – perhaps the largest – of the cultural incongruences this discourse serves to mediate.

It is important to note there is another episode that rivals the cruelty and brutality of these beatings but contains no mention of the supernatural. The accounts of Abelard’s imprisonment and subsequent torture are presented in an orthodox manner. They contain few footnotes, intertextual allusions or elements belonging to other discourses. Instead these descriptions are clear, concise and detailed. Let us consider this fragment:

In 1960, at the height of the clandestine resistance movement against Trujillo, Abelard underwent a particularly gruesome procedure. He was manacled to a chair,
placed out in the scorching sun, and then a wet rope was cinched cruelly about his forehead. It was called La Corona, a simple but horribly effective torture. At first the rope just grips your skull, but as the sun dries and tightens it, the pain becomes unbearable, would drive you mad. Among the prisoners of the Trujillato few tortures were more feared. Since it neither killed you nor left you alive. Abelard survived it but was never the same. Turned him into a vegetable. The proud flame of his intellect extinguished (251).

In contrast to the heterogeneous nature of the rest of the novel, the univocal tone of this account can be attributed to the existence of verifiable historical sources detailing the torture suffered by the prisoners of Trujillo’s regime. Here, in one of many discursive twists, the novel takes on a purely historiographical form and the fragment above constitutes an open, unambiguous condemnation of the political violence and cruelty of the Trujillato. Considering this, it is interesting to note the shift into the present tense that appears when the narrative voice describes the sensation felt by the victim: “At first the rope just grips your skull, but as the sun dries and tightens it, the pain becomes unbearable, would drive you mad”. This change, which is likely to go unnoticed by the reader, serves to promote empathy and can be considered among the many interpretive cues offered by the narrative voice.

A final note on fukú

Throughout this discussion we have noted how the veracity of the fantastic is repeatedly questioned by the narrative voice. The reason why the Cabral family incurred the wrath of Trujillo and the ensuing fukú underlies the entire novel. Three explanations are offered, ranging from the official account to the supernatural. The official and public account is quite simple: Abelard made a joke about the dictator, which was deemed offensive and reported to the authorities by his trusted neighbour. The second alternative would attribute his arrest and incarceration to a faction of the government whose role it was to seek out the nations most beautiful women in order to satisfy the dictator’s insatiable sexual desire. We learn that Abelard begins to fear his family’s safety when he is forced to hide his eldest daughter from public life, in hopes of preventing her from becoming one of Trujillo’s innumerable underage conquests. This account is certainly not official but nonetheless it is well known. In fact, the narrator comments how commonplace this story is on the island, and how easy it must have been for Vargas Llosa to immortalize the theme in *The Feast of the Goat*. The third alternative is only presented by the narrator and never attributed directly to Abelard: it is rumoured he wrote a manuscript about the dictator’s supernatural powers and their connection to the success of the regime. To support this hypothesis we are told that neither the manuscript, nor even a sample of his handwriting survives, and that even after imprisoning their father, Trujillo never approached the eldest of the Cabral’s daughters. The impartial perspective of the narrative voice is no different in this instance: “So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself. What’s certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here” (243). However, we learn as early as the introductory chapter that the narrator does indeed believe in the possibility of the curse, for *The Brief Life* is meant to be his very own form of zafa. Years after Oscar’s death Yunior begins to collect his writings, attempting to shed light on the darkness and violence this family experienced. The text we read is this collection of information, which he has compiled to
act as counter curse. While resolving such ambiguity would betray the ethos of the novel, I feel the need to add a final note on the fantastic. The novel’s final pages introduce the next generation of the Cabral family, Lola’s daughter, who is protected by three azabaches; protection charms carved out of a form of fossilized ebony into the shape of a closed fist. One charm which belonged to Belicia, one to Oscar and the third to the girl’s mother, in hopes that the compounded effect of all three will safeguard her from the family’s fuki.

27 The curse and all its supernatural elements linked are essential to the denouement of the plot but we have seen that it is also necessary to consider the contribution made by the network of intertextual references that guides the reader’s understanding of the narrative universe. Thanks to this auxiliary narrative, the author is able to address the discrepancies that arise from the contact zone born of the diaspora, in a way that compensates for the readers lack of knowledge. The previous pages have demonstrated how the myriad of allusion to science fiction, fantasy literature and pop-culture go beyond simply describing the protagonist. Once we consider how these elements interact with the historiographical, cultural and linguistic aspects of the novel, it becomes clear that their combined effect results in a new narrative for the collective remembering of this horrifically violent period of Dominican history. The tale of the Cabral family and more significantly, the reality of the Trujillato are so far beyond any rational depiction that only a heterogeneous, polyvocal text such as this will suffice to describe this narrative universe. Furthermore, the framework of intertextual allusions and the supernatural elements of the plot complement this novel’s narrative structure making the tale of The Brief Life accessible to any reader, regardless of their competence. Such depth makes Díaz’ work stand out from a well-established corpus of novels that explore the Trujillato, and the even greater corpus of dictator novels.

28 It comes as no surprise that in the years following Trujillo’s assassination he was represented in literature through symbols, hyperbole and religious allegories. In truth Díaz follows in this tradition, for in The Brief Life the natural order is so far transgressed only the fantastic can reconcile such a reality in the mind of the reader. A perspective which is strengthened when we take into account that, although Junot Díaz short stories are centred on the theme of the diaspora, their focus is the personal and familial experience. To date this is the only one of the author’s works that delves into the political and interestingly, it’s the only one that includes the fantastic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Following the tradition of Todorov, I will use the term “fantastic” to describe supernatural elements of the plot events, often linked to the folklore of the Dominican Republic, that lead to epistemological perplexity and a questioning of their veracity. These supernatural events are central to the denouement of the plot and yet defy all rationale. I do not wish to imply that the category of intertextual references are fantastic but rather that, in this novel, the two are closely related and serve a similar purpose.

2. The list of authors who have written about The Brief Life includes: Rita de Maeseneer, Pamela Rader, Elena Machado Sáez, Monica Hanna, Juanita Heredia, Ignacio López-Calvo, Daynali Flores-Rodríguez, Sandra Cox and Henry Wessells.

3. Barradas writes in Spanish using the terms “ciencia ficción” and “literatura fantástica”. All translations are mine. He mentions no other genres, nor does he make a distinction between the intertextual allusions, to which he references in this passage, and the fantastic elements of the plot. His terminology is derived perhaps from the novel itself where Díaz describes the protagonist as a “hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man” (6).

4. Alternatively Anne Garland Mahler proposes that fantasy, or what she calls the “superhero genre”, loosely defined as a incorporating a wealth of comic book and fantasy references and discussing Dominican history in distinctly supernatural terms” (119), serves to disguise the political commentary made this novel in order to make it more accessible to the reader. I will expand on Mahler’s proposal describing how fantasy assuages the horrors of the dictatorship, making them more palatable to the reader.

5. The association between the fantastic and magical realism is well established and can be referenced in most volumes describing either discourse. Some more general titles include The Oxford Companion to Fantasy Literature, A Companion to Magical Realism and Fantasy Literature a Readers Guide. Maggie Ann Bowers presents a comprehensive discussion of magical realism in Magic(al) Relism, where she debates the assertion that this literary tradition belongs solely to Latin America. This contested belief may be the reason critics of Hispanic-American literature associate Díaz’ use of the fantastic with the movement.

6. I propose that the narrative universe is indeed a “social space where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1).

7. Here, once again, we encounter the author’s use of the phrase “fantasy and sci-fi” to describe what we have already categorized as a group of intertextual references and a separate series of fantastic events. Let us now clarify that we will call these events (the fukú and all its consequences, Trujillo’s supernatural abilities, the power of La Inca’s prayers, family-member’s of premonition, and others) fantastic, rather than fantasy in line with the distinction made by Todorov. In The Brief Life the characters, the narrator and ultimately the reader hesitate to accept these events as truly supernatural. Several rational explanations offered throughout the novel, although in the end no definitive answer is provided.

8. The first occurrence takes place when the same men try to force Belicia to have an abortion. As they are pulling her into their car, the staff of the Peking Palace, her friends and employers, miraculously appears and Belicia is able to run away (142).

9. The emphasis is mine.

10. Benedict Anderson discussed imagined communities originally in terms of nationalism in Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. The key element is that these communities are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each
lives the image of their communion” (6). For a comprehensive discussion on the term, please refer to Voices of Collective Remembering by James Wertsch.

11. Yunior is one of several narrators in this novel, but for the purpose of this portion of my argument, the narrative voice can be attributed to him.

ABSTRACTS

Junot Díaz’ first novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007) is a complex text, at the core of which is an historical narrative about the Trujillo regime and its after-effects. By expanding on the previous scholarly discussion, this essay provides a comprehensive look at the roles of the fantastic in this novel, arguing that it serves as a tool for (re)presenting the incomprehensible violence of the dictatorship and mediating the cultural complexities that arose from the Dominican diaspora in the United States. In doing so, three main points are explored. The first describes how multiple intertextual references to comic books, fantasy literature and science fiction create a framework that facilitates the reader’s comprehension of the cultural disparities in the novel. There follows an exploration of the supernatural elements of the plot and their relationship to the autochthonous beliefs and customs of the Dominican Republic, while the final point describes the relationship between the framework intertextual references and the fantastic. Namely, how the former influences the reader’s perception of the latter and how the two elements work together to mitigate the author’s representation of the island nation’s brutal history.

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