DISSEMINATING “EL CHIVO”: JUNOT DÍAZ’S RESPONSE TO MARIO VARGAS LLOSA IN THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

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After publishing in 1996 a well received collection of short stories titled Drown, Junot Díaz burst into literary notoriety in 2007 with the publication of his novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, which received almost universal acclaim and earned him the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The book was celebrated for its creative use of language (it deftly alternates between, or mixes, English and Spanish), and for the breadth of its references to both popular culture (i.e., constant allusions to characters from comics, fantasy, and science fiction films and books) and the official literary canon (the title alone references both Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway’s story “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Cucumber”). It also explores the history of the Dominican Republic, particularly the period dominated by the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, from 1930 to 1961.¹

The novel chronicles various generations of a Dominican family that is marked directly and indirectly by Trujillo’s violence. Oscar, who lives in New Jersey with his mother Beli and his sister Lola, is an overweight young man with two obsessions in life: one is science fiction and fantasy (reading them and writing his own stories), and the other one is finding true love, or at least not dying a virgin, which is exceedingly difficult because Oscar is a stereotypical “nerdand extremely unlucky with women. As the novel progresses, we learn the story of Oscar’s mother, who moved to the United States after she was almost killed in the Dominican Republic for becoming, without knowing it, the lover of Trujillo’s sister’s husband. We also learn that Oscar’s grandfather had actually died in one of Trujillo’s prisons. A recurrent notion throughout the text is that the family—and perhaps the whole Dominican Republic—might be cursed.

In this essay, I will examine how the novel struggles to articulate a compelling representation of Trujillo’s dictatorial power, a process that implies for Diaz a confrontation with previous representations of the Dominican dictator. Specifically, I will focus on the novel’s explicit engagement with another novel that became an international success and which also deals with Trujillo’s dictatorship: Mario Vargas Llosa’s La fiesta del chivo (2000). Vargas Llosa’s novel combines two main stories: a reconstruction of the events that led to the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, and the story of a woman, Urania Cabral, who, years after the dictator’s death, returns to the island to visit her sick old father, only to relieve in her mind the events that led to her original departure: her father, a senator in Trujillo’s government, had offered her as a sexual gift to Trujillo in order to gain his favor. As is usually the case with Vargas Llosa, his fiction is carefully constructed around minutely researched historical detail. Dozens of fictional and historical characters interact in a realistic setting, including characters like Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo’s minion

¹For examples of the many celebratory reviews in the newspapers and magazines, see Daresiewwicz, Kakutani, and Mansbach; for a similar review in a specialized academic journal see Roboteau.
and afterwards recurrent president of the Dominican Republic, who was still alive when La fiesta del chivo was published.

In his interviews and in the text of his novel, Díaz has taken an openly polemical position towards Vargas Llosa's text. My purpose is to clarify the nature of Díaz's objections to La fiesta del chivo, to examine how his novel attempts to "correct" the deficiencies in the Peruvian novelist's text, and to comment on the somewhat paradoxical implications of that attempt. Díaz tries to subvert Vargas Llosa's literary strategies—which examine Trujillo's dictatorship through a psychologically realistic portrayal of the dictator and of several fictional and historical characters around him—by recurring to a semiotic frame articulated by references to fantasy and science fiction. The purpose of the re-framing strategy is precisely to move away from conventional realism and to present the novel's characters—particularly Trujillo—as incarnations (nodes or points of encounter) of structures of power so pervasive that their effects and influence cannot be exclusively explained in terms of the decisions or desires of any one single man.

In an interview conducted by the Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz clearly expresses his disdain for Vargas Llosa's novel about the infamous dictator:

You better believe that I was fucking with other books written about the Dominican Republic. I mean, have you read The Feast of the Goat? Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on that novel like it was the greatest thing on earth! And you should have seen the Dominican elites fawning over Vargas Llosa. The Great Vargas Llosa has deigned to visit the Dominican Republic! Call me a nationalist slash hater, but Vargas Llosa's take on the Trujillo regime was identical to Crasswell's and Crasswell wrote his biography 40 years ago! (Danticat)²

Díaz's principal objection here is that Vargas Llosa's novel is derivative, contributing nothing new to our understanding of Trujillo.

In another interview, Díaz presents another, more serious critique of Vargas Llosa's depiction of Trujillo:

El problema es que el guión que proporciona la figura de Trujillo es tan fuerte que si escribes sobre él te conviertes sin darte cuenta en su secretario. Le pasó incluso a Vargas Llosa. Como novela, La fiesta del chivo es irreprensible, y, sin embargo, cuando la lei me dejó mal sabor de boca, porque me di cuenta de que a Trujillo le hubiera encantado, porque perpetúa el mito. Yo intenso interrumpe el ritual celebratorio. El poder de Trujillo se perpetúa en las historias que se escriben sobre él. Mi libro trata de levantar una contrahistoria. (Lago n.p.)

For Díaz, Vargas Llosa's novel perpetuates the "myth of Trujillo, with the novelist becoming a de facto unintentional secretary to the dictator. Moreover, Díaz purports that his own text serves as a counterhistory, thus undoing the mythmaking of Vargas Llosa's novel. However, as Ignacio López-Calvo has aptly indicated: "... in many ways Díaz's novel involuntarily perpetuates Trujillo's myth as much, if not more so than, The Feast of the Goat" ("A Postmodern Platano" 85). In his attempt to move beyond Vargas Llosa's realistic approach, Díaz creates a fantastic framework for the dictator that paradoxically makes Trujillo's mythification almost unavoidable. Even if we accept Díaz's premise that Vargas Llosa's novel does not go beyond Crasswell's biography, the question

²As Díaz indicates, Vargas Llosa's novel was almost universally celebrated, even within the Dominican Republic. An example of such praise is the review by Tomás Castro Burdiz in the Dominican newspaper El Listin Diario: "Nunca antes un novelista de la dimensión de Vargas Llosa había puesto en el mapa un tema dominicano para que el público de otras latitudes nos descubriera. Debemos felicitarnos por la dicha de que la pluma de Vargas Llosa se haya posado en tema de nuestro patio y darle vuelo universal" (qtd. in Lifshey 439). However, the novel did have its harsh critics, particularly within the Dominican Republic; see Cassá. In God and Trujillo López Calvo expertly situates the novel in the context of the rich literature on the Trujillato. In December 2010 Vargas Llosa was awarded the "Orden de Cristóbal Colón" by Lionel Fernández, president of the Dominican Republic. The Secretary of Culture, José Rafael Lantigua, declared: "La fiesta del Chivo es la novela fundamental de la era de Trujillo, la que mejor transmite lo que fue" ("República Dominicana").
remains of what new understanding Díaz’s text is trying to purvey.

If we turn our attention to Díaz’s novel itself, we find two open references to Vargas Llosa which, albeit brief, deepen and expand the opinions expressed in interviews, and allow us to better appreciate the precise nature of Díaz’s objections. I should clarify from the beginning that my main interest is not proving or disproving the accuracy of Díaz’s criticisms of Vargas Llosa. One could argue for or against those criticisms and, as I have indicated, it could also be argued that Díaz ends up repeating some of Vargas Llosa’s “mistakes.” I am more interested in the nature of Díaz’s criticisms, in the issues he brings up as he defines Vargas Llosa’s limitations, and equally important, in the social and political elements he brings into the discussion as he attempts to “correct” the Peruvian novelist’s presentation of Trujillo’s dictatorship. 3

In the third chapter of the novel, there is a footnote (and footnotes are an essential part of the novel’s ludic style) that presents a short explanation of a character mentioned in passing in the main text:

The elders say, anything uttered for the first time summons a demon, and when twentieth century Dominicans first uttered the word freedom en masse the demon they summoned was Balaguer. (Known as the election thief... and the Homunculus)... In the days of the Trujillato, Balaguer was just one of El Jefe’s most efficient ringwraiths... After Trujillo’s death he would take over Project Domo and rule the country from 1960 to 1962, from 1966 to 1978, and again from 1986 to 1996 (by then dude was blind as a bat, a living mummy)... he unleashed a wave of violence against the Dominican left, death-squading hundreds and driving thousands more out of the country. It was he who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora... was a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself... Appeared as a sympathetic character in Vargas Llosa’s The Feast of the Goat. (90)

I will return to some of the implications of this passage, but at this point I want to emphasize two elements: first, the detail that Joaquin Balaguer is never referred to by his full name in the novel, but only as “Demon Balaguer;” and second, the contemptuous tone of the narrator and the aggressive epithets for Balaguer, which certainly distinguish Díaz’s approach from Vargas Llosa’s.

A second and final mention of Vargas Llosa in Díaz’s book concerns an aspect of Trujillo’s dictatorship that plays an important role in the Peruvian novelist’s text: Trujillo’s seemingly insatiable sexual appetite. This seems to be a fairly well publicized aspect of life under Trujillo, and Díaz himself acknowledges it in his novel. In fact, Díaz goes as far as declaring:

So common was the practice, so insatiable Trujillo’s appetites, that there were plenty of men in the nation, hombres de calidad y posición, who, believe or nor, offered up their daughters freely to the Failed Cattle Thief. (217)

It should be noticed that in this quotation, Díaz practically summarizes an important part of the plot of Vargas Llosa’s novel, where Senator Agustín Cabral offers his daughter Urania to Trujillo. In The Brief Wondrous Life, Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, faces a similar challenge, although to his credit, he does not offer his oldest daughter, Jacqueline, to the dictator. Apparently this displeases Trujillo, and not long afterwards, Abelard is arrested and spends the rest of his days in prison. Narrating the circumstances that lead to Abelard’s downfall, the narrator of the novel comments:

Let’s be honest, though. The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty common one on the Island. As common as krill. (Not that krill is too common on the Island but you get the drift.) So common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn’t have to do much except open his mouth to sif it out of the air. There’s one of these bellaco tales in almost everybody’s hometown. It’s one of those easy stories because 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

3 Although it cannot be counted as an explicit reference, it is significant (given Diaz’s evident engagement with Vargas Llosa’s novel) that the last name of Oscar’s mother’s family is “Cabrál,” the same as Urania’s in La fiesta del chivo.
house! And your family wouldn’t let him! Shit really is perfect, makes for plenty of fun reading. (244-45)

This mention of Vargas Llosa is even more dismissive than the previous one, as here the Peruvian novelist joins the ranks of those who have offered simplistic explanations (“it explains it all”) for Trujillo’s impact on the Dominican Republic.

Taken together, the novel’s two references to Vargas Llosa’s novel show Diaz’s opposition to what he regards as Vargas Llosa’s over-simplified presentation of the horrors of Trujillo’s dictatorship, from a seemingly “sympathetic” portrayal of Joaquin Balaguer to an over-emphasis on Trujillo’s sexual escapades that makes for plenty of “fun reading.” Indeed, the two references coincide with what Diaz has criticized in his interviews: the “problem” of the mere recycling of previously known information (Trujillo as sexual predator, Balaguer as mild mannered sidekick to the dictator) in order to create a portrait with which Trujillo himself would not have been entirely displeased. Again, it is not my objective here to support the accuracy of Diaz’s criticisms. In fact, one could argue that Vargas Llosa’s Balaguer is sinister precisely because he is so mild, as if he were patiently waiting for what the reader of the novel knows he in fact obtained in the end: to become Trujillo’s successor, holding on to power in less explicitly violent ways than “El Jefe,” but with similarly corrupting effects. With regards to Trujillo as a sexual predator, it must be said that, on the one hand, Diaz’s novel acknowledges the veracity of the charge; on the other hand, the scene in Vargas Llosa’s novel in which the old, almost impotent dictator rapes young Urania with his fingers so that she cannot claim that she left his room still a virgin, is as horrific an emblematic representation of Trujillo’s violence as one could come up with.

For Diaz, however, Vargas Llosa’s depiction, his “mythification” of Trujillo’s sexuality and his mild, somewhat “sympathetic portrayal of Balaguer (whom Diaz regards as a very real extension of Trujillo’s authoritarianism) come off as somewhat banal, unable to convey the true implications of the nefarious characters. Furthermore (and here we move closer to what constitutes, to my understanding, Diaz’s deeper critique of Vargas Llosa), in both cases Diaz objects to what might be considered personality traits of the characters: Balaguer’s mildness, Trujillo’s sexual appetite. As we will see below, Diaz condemns Vargas Llosa precisely to the extent that La fiesta is about Trujillo and Balaguer as characters, rather than about the Trujillato as a system. The distinction may be questionable, and based more on emphasis than substance. After all, it would not be accurate to state that Vargas Llosa’s novel is not about the Trujillato. However, it is a distinction that does seem to inform Diaz’s response to Vargas Llosa: it works as a creative misreading, or clínamen, which empowers the younger writer’s re-mapping of the territory previously covered by the elder writer. In order to better appreciate this move, we must examine more closely what Diaz presents as his alternative representations of those characters and issues that he criticizes in Vargas Llosa’s version.

Regarding Balaguer, the first thing to notice is that, as mentioned earlier, rather than referring to him by his full name, the novel’s narrator prefers to call him “Demon Balaguer.” That epithet is significant not simply as a way of emphasizing that he is not quite a “sympathetic character” as he seemingly is for Vargas Llosa. It actually inserts Balaguer in a web of references to fantasy and science fiction, a semiotic frame that the novel consistently returns to as the most effective way of representing the sheer pervasiveness and almost total quality of Trujillo’s power. The examples of that framing strategy are numerous, but a few merit closer examination.

While that is not my intention in this essay, a case could be made for a “Bloomian” reading of Diaz’s “anxiety of influence.” As Harold Bloom notes, “Poetic Influence...always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence... is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism...” (30). Arguably one could find some of those traits in Diaz’s reading (or misreading) of Vargas Llosa. However, Bloom’s theory operates in the form of a semi-conscious, Freudian struggle of newer writers against older ones, whereas Diaz’s text is an explicit, premeditated response to Vargas Llosa’s. Ignacio López Calvo compellingly links Diaz’s attitude to Vargas Llosa to Bloom’s notion of “apophardes” (“A Postmodern Plátano’s Trujillo” 82).
In an attempt to adequately portray Trujillo's influence, the novel recurs to the following comparison:

In some ways living in Santo Domingo under the Trujillo era was a lot like being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode that Oscar loved so much, the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world, a town called Peavskville. The white kid 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... Between 1930 (when the Failed Cattle thief seized power) and 1961 (the year he got blazed) Santo Domingo was the Caribbean's very own Peavskville, with Trujillo playing the part of Anthony and the rest of us reprising the role of the Man Who Turned into Jack-in-the-Box... (224-25)

The *Twilight Zone* referent is effective inasmuch as it deftly combines fantastic and realistic modes of representation: Trujillo's "monstrous influence" is "godlike, but it also operates through the very human means of terrorizing the population into spying on each other and denouncing their neighbors in attempts of proving their loyalty to the regime.

Similar allusions multiply from page to page in the novel. In the first footnote, which actually introduces Trujillo to the reader, one reads:

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)

We should notice here, as the narrator goes through a list of possible choices, the explicit emphasis on the difficulty of finding the right language or frame that will adequately represent (or "truly capture") Trujillo's power. In the text, that inability to adequately portray power leads to an anxious proliferation of epithets and references, rather than to their decrease. Signifiers multiply as the signified becomes more elusive, and gradually Diaz's main concerns (and the basis of his main objection to Vargas Llosa) begin to emerge with more clarity: language itself, and literary representation.

Another example worth mentioning has to do with the temporal limits of Trujillo's power. Regarding the end of Trujillo's regime (and this is a detail that touches upon Balaguer, Trujillo's main minion and eventual successor), we are told: "At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken by "a great wind" and neatly blown away, with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after his death he lingered" (156). What all the supernatural and science-fiction references to Trujillo and "Demon Balaguer" have in common is that they present a disembodied (which should not be taken to mean immaterial, but rather nonlocal) form of power. In this case, Trujillo's spectrum of epithets and references points to what Michel Foucault might term a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization (*History* 92). I will return to some of the implications of Diaz's nonlocal view of power.

Regarding the other aspect of Vargas Llosa's novel that Diaz "corrects, namely the extent to which Trujillo's practices and desires as a sexual predator offer an "explanation" for his actions (the imprisonment of Abelard in the novel), the narrative informs us that "there is another, less-known, variant of the Abelard vs. Trujillo narrative," in which Abelard "got in trouble because of a book" (245). Apparently, Abelard was writing a book about Trujillo, and

His shit, if we are to believe the whispers, was an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime! A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the

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*Sauron* is the protagonist in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. *Arawn* is a villain in Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* fantasy novels. *Darkseid* is a villain in the DC comics universe, originally created by Jack Kirby in his "New Gods" comics.
president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world! (245)

Paradoxically, after Abelard’s death, his daughter Jackie is not touched by Trujillo, but all of Abelard’s writings disappear, an outcome that points to a political, not a sexual explanation for his death. Diaz does not totally discount Trujillo’s sexual interest in Jackie as a contributing element in Abelard’s downfall. However, his version partially disqualifies the “official (one might say, ‘Vargas Llosian’)” reason. It is clear from the outcome of the events that Abelard’s political opposition, and moreover an opposition expressed through writing, constitutes a more definitive cause.

The novel’s alternative to the “sexual” explanation is certainly plausible: an exposé of Trujillo could definitely cause the death of its author. But the nature of Abelard’s alleged book is particularly revealing. It consists of an argument for the supernatural causes of Trujillo’s power. Alert readers cannot help but notice the metafictional strategy: Abelard’s hypothesis is very close to that of the book they hold in their hands, which describes Trujillo’s powers in terms of long lasting curse (“Fukú Americanus”) and through an array of supernatural and fantastic references. Thus, one can discern a common trait in the novel’s explicit criticisms of Vargas Llosa’s approach and the alternatives it presents to that approach. In both cases, that of Demon Balaguier (correcting Vargas Llosa’s “mild portrayal of Balaguier”) and that of the book that probes the supernatural sources of Trujillo’s power (correcting Vargas Llosa’s excessive emphasis on Trujillo’s sexual desire as a cause of his criminal behavior), the language of fantasy and science fiction is used to expose a form of power that defies simple representation, and that cannot be reduced to the foibles of one man.

It is in the realm of the representation of power that we can locate Díaz’s deepest objection to Vargas Llosa. Vargas Llosa’s portrayal of Trujillo adheres to what we might call, paraphrasing Derrida, an “aesthetics of presence. La fiesta is always confident in its ability to apprehend and represent its multiple fictional and non-fictional characters and settings: they constitute clear referents that the text makes “present” for the reader. Díaz, on the other hand, is keenly aware of the inability of representation to fully capture—or even adequately apprehend—the complexities of (Dominican) reality.  

Vargas Llosa’s characters—Trujillo, Balaguier—behave as if they were merely people. This is in accord with Vargas Llosa’s often expressed commitment to the methods of literary realism—he acknowledges Flaubert and the nineteenth-century masters of the novel as his models, even as he often experiments with other structural aspects of the text. His characters respond to psychological and emotional motives that literary realism made commonplace in the realm of literature. In this regard, he has clearly declared:

I have always had a realistic obsession; I need to give the impression, the feeling, that a novel has serious and deep links with a living experience, with real life. I have never written fantastic literature, not because I am against it; on the contrary I greatly

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6 One of the most famous exposés of Trujillo’s corruption was written by the Spanish writer Jesús Gallinés: *La era de Trujillo: un estudio causístico de dictadura latinoamericana*. Trujillo had Gallinés killed. The Spanish novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán has written a novel on Gallinés’s murder.

7 I am paraphrasing the notion of a “metaphysics of presence,” which Derrida associates with Western metaphysical conceptions of language that assume that it gives access to a transcendental, stable signified (logocentrism). Derrida’s project is precisely “the de-constructive of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified” (49). Díaz’s project seems to me an attempt to deconstruct similar views of literature and history.

8 In an interview Vargas Llosa states: “...profeso una gran admiración por Flaubert. Es probablemente el escritor del siglo XIX que yo admire más. Ninguno me ha conmovido tanto y a ninguno he releído con tal intensidad” (Cano Gaviria 66).
admire this kind of literature. But when I write, I need a linkage with living reality, which is also an appearance, as in the case of fantastic literature. (A Writer's 110)

Moreover, in a 1979 article on the fall of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, Vargas Llosa makes the following statement about Trujillo that could be easily applied to the character as it is portrayed in La fiesta del chivo twenty years later:

El régimen de los Somoza ha sido algo más rudimentario, menos descarnado y abstracto, que la dictadura tecnológica de nuestro tiempo: su antecedente trágico. Pertenece a esa variedad de la que fueron prototipos un Trujillo, un Papa Doc, un Pérez Jiménez, y de la que sobrevivieron un Stroessner y un Baby Doc. Es decir, la dictadura individual, del bribón con entorchados, sin pretensiones ni coartadas históricas, cuyos móviles son simples y claros: atomizarse en el poder a como dé lugar y saquear el país hasta dejarlo anémico. (Contra viento 352-53)

Vargas Llosa places the emphasis on the individual dictator, whose motives are “simple and clear.” Arguably, and in spite of its formal complexity, La fiesta del chivo still adheres to Vargas Llosa’s view of the “trogloodyte” dictator expressed in the 1979 article. However, and perhaps paradoxically given the undeniable personality cult around Trujillo and Balaguer, for countless Dominicans the two leaders are not mere people, or simply scoundrels with relatively clear, if despicable, purposes. Those figures are articulations of social, political, and historical forces that go well beyond the power or control of any one individual.9

In contrast to Vargas Llosa, Díaz insists on liminal genres like science fiction and comic books, precisely the kind of fantasy that Vargas Llosa renounces in his choice of realism. He does so in part to express the impossibility of finding the appropriate language to represent power (Díaz’s endless chain of fantastic signifiers). Moreover, his approach highlights the potential complicity of a language that assumes its own transparency too easily. Díaz’s novel explicitly ponders on its own need to recur to the language of science fiction and fantasy in order to describe an all-pervasive authority that is adept at co-opting even attempts to challenge it. In doing so, Díaz underscores the disseminated nature of power and its deep connections to language and representation. La fiesta del chivo, although not strictly written in chronological order with an omniscient narrator, does not particularly question its own status as literary artifact – its language seemingly points to historical events and human emotions with apparent transparency. Thus, it gives to its object, Trujillo, well defined contours and limits that according to Díaz do not do justice to the dictatorship’s capacity of multiple permutations, and its ability to operate with almost total ubiquity throughout society. This is not to say that Vargas Llosa is not aware that Trujillo’s power was intimately connected with multiple alliances at local and international levels. But his text’s emphasis on portraying the dictator in a psychologically “realistic” way does not adequately convey, for Díaz, the monstrously impersonal, systemic nature of Trujillo’s dictatorship.10

In his representation of dictatorial power, Díaz’s novel does not privilege the will of a “trogloodyte” despot, but a web of economic, political, social, and cultural power relations and

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9 One might safely assume that Vargas Llosa would not necessarily deny an ideological agenda to his “trogloodyte” dictators, although the very term suggests that such agendas would be entirely subordinated to the dictator’s self-aggrandizement, and the novelist does refer to dictators “sin pretensiones ni coartadas históricas.” Such is certainly not the case of Trujillo. It is definitely possible to see the Trujillato as (not exclusively, but importantly) a racist ideological mapping of Dominican history that certainly precedes Trujillo and goes well beyond him, finding in Balaguer one of its main champions. In Trujillo, Juan Bosch examines some of those ideological components, which blossom in several of Balaguer’s books, particularly his La isla al revés. Néstor Rodríguez performs a skillful reading of Balaguer’s text in La isla y su envés.

10 Juan Bosch has attempted to trace the systemic roots of Trujillo’s dictatorship to the very conquest of the island, highlighting local colonial structures that have been closely related to international economic and political interests. See Trujillo and Composición. For some apt observations on Bosch’s own ideological assumptions, see San Miguel. For the Trujillato’s indebtedness to the U.S. see Roorda.
interests with no fixed center. Trujillo is the most accessible label for that violent structure, but
beyond the actual person in charge of the state, “Trujillon names everything, from the city itself of
Santo Domingo (whose name was changed to “Ciudad Trujillo”) to any point in the structure at
which any private citizen might turn another one to the authorities out of fear of being himself turned
in first. Violence, paranoia and fear permeate the whole of society, which thus becomes an
embodiment of Trujillo, a matrix where “Trujillo” can manifest at any moment and at any point.

One strategy that Diaz uses to achieve such ubiquity of Trujillo-ness is to avoid historical
specificity regarding the temporal limits of the dictatorship itself (there are certainly more dates and
names from Trujillo’s regime that the reader can check against the history books in Vargas Llosa’s
novel). He then allows fantastic/science-fiction references to fill the gaps in the historical context.
Diaz complements that approach by making his overall historical frame for the Dominican Republic
wider—but vaguer—than Vargas Llosa’s. As does Julia Alvarez’s In the Time of the Butterflies.
Diaz’s novel places the Trujillato in a context that goes all the way back to the “discovery” of
the island by Columbus, and then proceeds to fill that wider frame with the fuku that has dominated
Dominican history for centuries. As a result, “Trujillo” truly seems boundless in time and space.11

The dictator in Diaz’s novel is articulated like a constantly deconstructed/deconstructible
language that attempts to inscribe a violently coherent nation on the bodies of its citizens, but which
in fact lacks any core or concrete source; thus, the usefulness of the language of fantasy and science
fiction in describing its seeming lack of human limits. We see an indication of this when, after
Trujillo’s “death,” his power is recycled and rearticulated in another key by Demon Balaguer: it is
precisely in that dissemination that true power lies. Those structures—that specific configuration of
power—wrote themselves as Trujillo, and reconfigure themselves—write another figure—in
Balaguer.12

A possible objection may be raised at this point: one might argue that in both Diaz and Vargas
Llosa power and authority are still linked to the figure of Trujillo. Even if Diaz multiplies his
metaphors and similes for Trujillo, do multiple metaphors for power mean that the source is not
conceived as a singular individual? The question is valid, but it ignores the importance and the
implications of (literary, in this case) representation. The realistic representation of Trujillo as a
flawed human being who keeps a strong hold of the reins of the Dominican state, regardless of how
complex his web of intrigues and manipulations, conveys a different conception of power than the
multiple superhuman and non-human metaphors Diaz employs, which privilege historical forces that
reach a singular level of intensity during Trujillo’s regime, but which operate independently of him.
Yes, both Diaz and Vargas Llosa are still writing about Trujillo (a reader inattentive to the effects
of employment on the way a story or historical portrait is articulated might complain: about the same
Trujillo), but their aesthetic choices do have an effect on the way we understand the modus operandi
of power and also, as we shall see, on the possibilities of resistance to that power. It may be that
Diaz is unfair to Vargas Llosa, and it may be that his version of the Trujillato follows the Peruvian

11 The novel itself opens with the screams of African slaves in the Middle Passage and the death
of the original Taino inhabitants of the island, as “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed
the fuku on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (1). Before that, there is an epigraph
from Derek Walcott’s “The Schooner Flight,” which encompasses a long history of colonialism in
the Caribbean. And of course, much of the novel’s action takes place decades after Trujillo, in the
context of the Dominican diaspora in the U.S.

12 In that regard, my reading differs from the interesting approach offered by Daynali Flores-
Rodriguez, who suggests that “the dictator figure in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao becomes
trivialized through the use of adjectives that don’t convey the individual brought forth by historical
accounts. There is no story that is worth mentioning about the dictator or his followers, and Rafael
Leónidas Trujillo is dispossessed of what makes him human and becomes instead a cartoon, a two-
dimensional figure reducible to pejorative monikers” (94). In my analysis, the chain of comic
book/fantasy/science fiction labels that the novel attaches to Trujillo highlights (in spite of the
pejorative monikers) Trujillo’s might and influence precisely because he cannot be reduced to, as
Flores-Rodriguez indicates, “an individual with personal motives” (94).
novelists lead more than Díaz would care to admit, but it is not the case that he is fundamentally doing the same thing as Vargas Llosa. In spite of the unavoidable overlaps, the two novelists recur to very different sets of literary strategies in their attempts to illuminate the same period of Dominican history.\textsuperscript{13}

Díaz’s scriptural—structural—view of dictatorial power has significant precedents. In an important essay on the Latin American dictator novel (a genre that looms large but mostly unacknowledged behind Díaz’s literary performance), Roberto González Echevarría has written about Augusto Roa Bastos’s \textit{Yo el supremo}, one of the masterpieces of the genre:

Dr. Francia’s fear of the pasquinade, his abuse of Policarpio Patiño (to whom he dictates his own—Patiño’s—death sentence), his constant worry about writing, all stem from the fact that he has found and used the power implicit in language itself. The Supremo defines power as being able to do through others what we are unable to do ourselves: language, being separate from what it designates, is the very embodiment of power, for things act and mean through it without ceasing to be themselves. Dr. Francia has also realized that he cannot control language, particularly written language, that it has a life of its own that threatens him. (79)\textsuperscript{14}

Díaz’s view of Trujillo’s power, as presented in the novel, closely resembles “el Supremo’s” power as described by González Echevarría. Trujillo is identified in the novel with a chain of signifiers (Sauron, Arrown, Darkeisid, the boy from \textit{Twilight Zone}, and so on) that, by virtue of their very plurality, cannot be pinned to a single, concrete signified. The dictator is a violent language that temporarily embodies power precisely to the degree that it always remains partially disembodied. Being a language, a particularly opaque and destructive grammar of events and ideas, Trujillo cannot be killed, and it is not surprising that while Vargas Llosa’s novel has a relatively optimistic ending, Díaz’s is more ambiguous. At the end of \textit{La fiesta}, Urania, still weary about her relation to the Dominican Republic, promises herself that she will write to her young niece, Mariana: there is an opening to the future and, even though Balaguer was still alive when the novel was written, he was only (like Trujillo) a man. The situation is darker at the end of Díaz’s novel. There is also a young girl who represents future hope (Lola’s daughter, Isis), but inasmuch as Trujillo thrives on his lack of full embodiment, his shadow lurks over any possible future.

A disturbing corollary of that “scriptural” view of dictatorial power that González Echevarría highlights in his essay is that, as much as a dictator may fear language because it is beyond his control, there is also a complicity in tension—mutual recognition in writing—between dictator and writer (between Dr. Francia and his secretary in the passage quoted above). Díaz also acknowledges that disquieting complicity in a revealing passage from the novel:

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. \textit{Like, after all, recognizes like.} (97)

Díaz does not deny the rebellious possibilities of language, but recognizes that language itself is always already embedded in power structures that constrict it so that, at best, it cannot be wholly controlled, and at worst, it can become all too easily complicit with the very authority that it tries to challenge. The easiest way to fall into that trap is to be excessively naïve about language’s

\textsuperscript{13}For the notion of “emplolment,” see White’s \textit{Metahistory} and \textit{Tropics}. As White indicates for the writing of History, any specific mode of emplotment “has its implication for the cognitive operations by which the historian seeks to ‘explain’ what was ‘really happening’ during the process of which it provides an image of its true form” (\textit{Metahistory} 11). What is true of historians is certainly true of novelists attempting to elucidate historical events and characters through their fictions.

\textsuperscript{14}For a critical assessment of González Echevarría’s views, see Martin. Whether one agrees with González Echevarría or not, my point in this essay is that his views are in fact quite similar to those presented in Díaz’s novel. For other approaches to the dictator novel, see Calviño Iglesias, and Castellanos.
capacity for the accurate unveiling of truth—Vargas Llosa's main limitation from Díaz's perspective.

By deconstructing the figure of Trujillo—by revealing a complex node of slippery power relations and disturbing discursive practices where Vargas Llosa presents a realist facsimile of a person—Díaz aligns himself with an already well established current of Latin American writers that examine the figure of the dictator with a nuanced complexity that traditional realism, or reductionist psycho-biographical explanations, does not allow for. Examples of compatible texts could include García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca*, Carpenter's *El recurso del método*, and Roa Bastos's *Yo el supremo*, all of which break with the conventions of literary realism in order to better (yet also, more ambiguously) represent dictatorial power. From that perspective, one could argue that Díaz's approach does "correct (or complicate) that of Vargas Llosa in significant ways. However, I would like to touch briefly on an important related issue that it is easy to overlook. What happens to the question of resistance, of opposition to the dictator's authority, in both writers?

From that perspective, it would seem that Díaz's novel offers little hope. The murder of Trujillo is a notable example: it is an important event at the very center of Vargas Llosa's narrative. Precisely because the dictator is "a person," he can be killed. This is not to say that Vargas Llosa naively believes that the death of any dictator—of Trujillo in particular—will bring everlasting peace. Lurking in the shadows of Trujillo's power in order to succeed him, the figure of Balaguer points to a clear historical awareness of the fragility of the struggle against injustice, and highlights the impossibility of permanent happy endings. However, in Vargas Llosa's universe people make history and are able to transform situations for the better, even if only precariously or temporarily. Urania's willingness to renew her relation to the Dominican Republic through her connection to her young nice emblematizes that admittedly fragile hope.

In Díaz's novel, Trujillo's death appears in one of the many footnotes. However, it is a death that hardly matters, since the language of science fiction and fantasy that Díaz uses to describe Trujillo's dictatorship certainly creates—one might argue: it goes out of its way to create—an atmosphere of all pervasive, insurmountable power. Equally unsettling are the words of Lola, Oscar's sister, towards the end of the novel. Oscar, naively in love with a prostitute whose "official boyfriend is a policeman, is brutally murdered by the policeman's assistants. After the funeral, the narrator tells us: "Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are (324). Lola's words not only negate the possibility of resistance to oppression, but establish total equality between victims and victimizers. Arguably, there can be a legitimate denunciation of the degree to which the population under a dictatorship becomes complicit with its power. Both Díaz and Vargas Llosa insist on that point: under Trujillo's regime most of the people became informants. But to turn complicity into identity, or to frame it in another way, to turn metonymy into metaphor, is a very problematic move that overrides the reasons for that complicity—be they selfishness or fear—by essentializing the regime in a way that admits no reply.  

Paradoxically, one could argue that, even though the novel makes an important point in emphasizing that we are all complicit in the structures that at their worst produce Trujillos (Vargas Llosa makes the same point), in its somewhat cynical conclusion that power operates equally through and in spite of all of us, it trivializes Trujillo's grievous crimes even more than Vargas Llosa presumably does (for Díaz). This does not mean that the novel's point is totally wrong. If Trujillo  

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15 Flores-Rodríguez offers an alternative reading of the same phenomenon, interpreting it as an attempt to move beyond the polar dichotomies of good/bad, victim/victimizer, thus creating a space for a more nuanced presentation of power. "By embracing the contradictory nature of his characters, Junot Díaz opens up a third space in the theorization of power in Caribbean literature; he goes beyond the traditional roles of oppressors and oppressed. This third space is not as clearly delimited as the other two and demands from its readers an effort to go beyond superficial interpretations of the Caribbean. If, not, the reader takes the risk of getting swayed again by the ready dichotomy of victimizers and victims" (97). It is certainly a possible reading, although one open to debate, as there is always debate regarding the need—and difficulty—of assessing with justice the role of the victims of dire acts or structures of violence.
the man can be killed, it may be that “Trujillo-ness”—now almost a figure for the capacity for evil in human beings—is perhaps undefeatable. But simply to stop at that conclusion—evil “as such can never be totally defeated”—is at best banal, and ignores the obvious: specific injustices can always be remedied, repaired or improved.  

As indicated earlier, Ignacio López Calvo has convincingly argued that, in spite of Díaz’s criticisms of Vargas Llosa, his novel mythologizes Trujillo even more than La fiesta does, transforming the dictator into a cosmic force. López Calvo links Díaz’s style to “magical realism,” indicating that the tropical exoticism, the hyper-violence and sensualism, the cult of Third World underdevelopment, the incorporation of superstitions, mythical legends and popular folklore, the typical “special effects” of magical realism (where “magical” or illogical elements appear in apparently normal circumstances and characters accept them instead of questioning them) are all there. (“A Postmodern Plátano’s Trujillo” 86)  

It is certainly hard to disagree with López Calvo, particularly considering the enthusiastic international reception of the novel, and international expectations of Latin American literature. What I have tried to show is that the “mythification” of Trujillo is a risk inherent to the way Díaz approaches his attempt to represent disseminated, not fully embodied power. When one examines Díaz’s alternatives to Vargas Llosa’s representation of Trujillo, it becomes clear that the contrast between the two novels is grounded on the issue of how power operates, how it can be best represented, and how effectively it can be resisted.

The concept of power that Díaz presents in his novel has deep affinities with Michel Foucault’s notions of how power operates and circulates in society. Foucault emphasized that what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.” (Power 119)

From such a perspective, Lola’s comment that the Dominican Republic has “a million Trujillos” makes sense indeed. Concerning the important question of resistance, Foucault specifies: It seems to me that power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it, that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in. To say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what. I would suggest rather that there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. (Power 141-42)

Díaz also acknowledges the possibility of, and need for, resistance, but only in a context in which power operates fully on, against, and through the Dominican population. “Trujillo,” in the novel, is a name for a web of violent relations, not a discrete source of authority.

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16At one point the novel does state, as if suddenly aware of the cumulative effect of its overpowering metaphors: “But let’s not go completely overboard: Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways, but there were plenty of people who despaired El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who resisted” (226). In spite of the emphatic italics at the end, the futility of resistance dominates the novel’s choice of images for the Trujillato. Even in this quote, revealingly, Trujillo’s regime is described in terms of a geographical location (Mordor in The Lord of the Rings).

17For Díaz’s novel’s links to Magical Realism, see also Hanna.

18On December 17, 2010, Díaz received another prize for his novel, the “Premio Cunhambebe de Literatura Extranjera” given to the best foreign novel published in Brazil.
It could also be argued that my comparison—which simply attempts to highlight the pervasive, non-localized Foucauldian view of power—is unfair to Foucault. Although Foucault has been criticized for his all-encompassing view of power, it should be clear that his view of resistance, limited as it may be, is in some significant ways not at all similar to Díaz’s. Resistance, while local and paradoxically a result of power, is nonetheless, like power, concrete, material, and specific in its results. Transcendental victories are never achieved, but that does not invalidate the urgency of concrete struggles. Although Díaz’s novel presumably does not invalidate resistance either, its supernatural metaphors for power render resistances little less than futile. In that sense, one could use against Díaz the argument that Edward Said uses, perhaps unfairly, against Foucault’s conception of power: “If power oppresses and controls and manipulates, then everything that resists it is not morally equal to power, is not neutrally and simply a weapon against that power. Resistance cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it, except in some metaphysical, ultimately trivial sense” (246).

Said’s point may be in harmony with the position of Yunior, the novel’s narrator, at the end of the novel. He is saving Oscar’s manuscripts and the memory of his story, for he knows one day Isis, Lola’s daughter, will come knocking at his door, asking to know about her family’s history. Yunior says: “And 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 an’ she’ll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream.” (331). But of course, right after that hopeful statement, another fantasy/science fiction reference comes up, this time to the Watchmen graphic novel, where after a monstrous plan that “saves the world_by taking the lives of millions, one character asks another: “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end” (331). To which the second character answers: “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.” (331). Again, if by “nothing ever ends the narrator—via the Watchmen—means the structures (between nations or within the human psyche) that produce the Trujillos of the world, then he may be right for all we know: ending those once and for all may be nothing but a lost cause. If, however, we think more modestly about the possibility—and the importance—of ending specific, concrete manifestations of injustice, then Díaz’s novel is somewhat lopsided in its approach. Yunior does say at the beginning of the novel that his narrative should serve as a “counter-spell” (7) of sorts to the “curse” that afflicts the Dominican Republic. If so, the success of that counter-spell is more than questionable.

However, it may be that the real ending of the novel belongs to Oscar: we find out, through a letter that only reaches the States after his death, that before being killed he actually managed to make love to Ybón, the prostitute, and lose his virginity. Referring not only to the sensual pleasure of love-making, but also to the sweetness of human intimacy, Oscar writes: “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty! Oscar’s final discovery seemingly reverses Joseph Conrad’s famous phrase in Heart of Darkness—“The horror! The horror!”—which encapsulates a long history of global colonial structures that were complicit with, or manifested as, Trujillo’s violent takeover of the Dominican Republic. Whether to read this ending optimistically, as an affirmation of the difference that those small moments of connection can represent in human relations, or pessimistically, as a retreat into a domain of private domestic bliss at the expense of larger collective issues, is up to each of us as readers.

Works Cited


