

Democracy, Interrupted: Commissioning the “Truth” in Diasporic Dominican American Literature

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In *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (1998), an account of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Antjie Krog writes about her skepticism of the truth commission process. “A commission for truth?” she asks at one point, expressing doubt that this practice can engender justice. She recalls, however, being persuaded of its merits in “precisely seven and a half minutes” by Chilean philosopher and activist José Zalaquett, who served on the Chilean Truth Commission (31). “Truth does not bring back the dead,” she writes, paraphrasing Zalaquett, “but releases them from silence” (32).

Diasporic Dominican American writers perform this task of “releas[ing] [the dead] from silence” in literary truth commissions, which, like their political and officially sanctioned counterparts, bear witness to atrocities to promote and engender sustainable forms of democracy. Although the South African TRC may be the most well-known truth commission, truth commissions in Latin America have become a popular mechanism of what is known as *transitional justice*. Transitional justice can be described as the justice sought in the aftermath of political repression, as a society attempts to address the atrocities of a previous administration in order to transition toward democratic governance.¹ This justice can come in many forms, but the most common mechanisms include trials, truth commissions, or hybrid tribunals. Scholars typically trace the origins of transitional justice to the trials held in the aftermath of World War II (such as the Nuremberg Tribunal), although the term itself did not appear until the early 1990s (Arthur 326). At present, we are in what Ruti G. Teitel calls the “third phase” of transitional justice, wherein what had once been an exceptional response to changes in power post-World War II has become a matter of course for transitioning states. While the first phase of the transitional justice movement was marked by a universalist conception of justice that emphasized punishing perpetrators in trials such as Nuremberg, the second and third phases have been defined by the emergence and prevalence of alternative methods of justice

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DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlx048

MELUS • Volume 42 • Number 3 • (Fall 2017)

that acknowledge its contingency (70). Since the late 1980s, truth commissions—rather than trials—have been promoted as a tool for reconstructing the rule of law in transitional societies. In contrast to what is perceived as the “retributive justice” of trials, truth commissions are portrayed as “restorative,” a way to ascribe accountability for crimes in a manner that promotes healing as opposed to divisiveness (Olsen, Payne, and Reiter 982-83). As states that are transitioning often must contend with the presence of outgoing leaders and their supporters, truth commissions theoretically satisfy the desire for justice while balancing the threat of destabilization that accompanies regime change.

There have been approximately forty truth commissions since the wave of Latin American regime changes in the 1980s (Hayner xi-xii). What defines a truth commission has been subject to debate in the transitional justice field, but Priscilla Hayner’s definition, initially published in an article in 1994 and revised in her book, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (2011), has been particularly influential:

A truth commission (1) is focused on the past, rather than ongoing, events; (2) investigates a pattern of events that took place over a period of time; (3) engages directly and broadly with the affected population, gathering information on their experiences; (4) is a temporary body, with the aim of concluding with a final report; and (5) is officially authorized or empowered by the state under review. (11)

While truth commission mandates vary (not all truth commissions have final reports or emphasize reconciliation, for example), Hayner’s definition elucidates the characteristics that commissioning bodies typically share: they are temporary, retrospective, and officially sanctioned. Truth commissions largely differ from trials in their orientation; while trials tend to focus on the acts of the perpetrators, truth commissions tend to center on the victims of a repressive regime and their experiences (Hayner 22). In this way, truth commissions reverse the typical paradigm of trials, in which victim testimony is limited in prosecuting a perpetrator, in order to privilege collective victim testimony over a perpetrator’s individual guilt. Through this collective testimony, truth commissions not only illustrate the systemic quality of violence in authoritarian societies but also how this violence becomes reproduced in the forceful silencing of a community.

Literary forms of “truth-telling” have arisen in the absence of officially sanctioned truth commissions that perform the process of testimony to engender change. Novels by two diasporic Dominican Americans, Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), demonstrate how literature has not only become a critical tool of testimony but, more importantly, how it has become central in efforts to democratize justice in places marked by the absence of formalized responses to atrocities. A literary approach contrasts to other scholarship on truth

commissions, which often focuses on countries that have or have had formal commissions, to articulate how literature testifies to enact its own form of justice.

The Dominican Republic provides a compelling case with which to examine the role of literature in enacting justice, not only because of the lengthy dictatorship it experienced under General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina (1930-61) but also because of how the presidents that followed Trujillo chose to engage with his legacy. In contrast to neighboring Haiti, which has also experienced dictatorships and political unrest, the Dominican Republic has never formed a truth commission and, in fact, implemented an official policy of silence after the end of Trujillo's rule, known as "*borrón y cuenta nueva* (erasure and fresh start)." The first president elected in the aftermath of Trujillo's assassination, Juan Bosch, instituted this policy as a way of "moving on from and letting go of the painful memories of the dictatorship." In imposing this policy of forgetting, Bosch "deterred heightened awareness of the past and curtailed conflict related to the confrontation of that past." Bosch prioritized reconciliation above concerns about truth and justice, likely because he imagined that this tactic would promote peace at a time of strife in the fragile country. However, his efforts to maintain this pretense of unity, and the Dominican Republic's budding democracy, were swiftly undermined by the US government, which staged a coup d'état only seven months into Bosch's term (Liberato 9). Bosch's successor, Joaquín Balaguer, who was also Trujillo's puppet president at the time of the dictator's assassination, would reinforce this repression of memory—often with violence—during his six terms as president (1966-78; 1986-96) (1).

Trujillo's rule ended before truth commissions became popular in Central and South America, but such commissions can take place years after an administration, as long as survivors still remain who can testify to the events that occurred. However, unlike other countries in this region that have been instrumental in the transitional justice movement, the Dominican Republic's efforts to deal with the past have been sporadic, or what scholar Ana Liberato characterizes as "low intensity . . . with eruptions of episodic remembering" (12). According to Liberato, the Dominican state has played a "timid role" in memory efforts so that "[h]istorical and literary works have served as more permanent facilities of memory, particularly in relation with the Trujillo Era" (10). As many scholars have noted, "the Trujillo dictatorship . . . is arguably *the* central theme of late-twentieth-century Dominican literature" (Horn 19). However, as Lucía Suárez observes, Dominican literature "has traditionally ignored the violence and strife the country continues to experience" (7) and can, at times, reinforce the problematic racial and gender politics that are part of Trujillo's enduring legacy.²

In contrast, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* bear witness to the "violence and strife" in the Dominican Republic, breaking the policy of *borrón y cuenta nueva* to unsettle—rather than reconcile—the present with the past. Whereas "[w]ritings of Dominican *letrados* in many ways

function as a key archive of the authoritarian past” (Horn 19), these two novels complicate the contents of this archive to assert a complex transnational imaginary that subverts the homogeneous nationalist vision articulated by Trujillo. As was the case in the Haitian truth commission, in which diasporic Haitians were instrumental, diasporic Dominican American writers such as Álvarez and Díaz have been critical in creating a space to bear witness outside the country’s borders.³ Indeed, as several Latina/o scholars have articulated, these writers have transformed the transnational space between the United States and the Dominican Republic to interrogate and rearticulate conceptions of resistance, identity formation, history, and national belonging.⁴ While Álvarez’s and Díaz’s diasporic subjectivities arguably grant them greater license to comment on and criticize the Dominican government than their Dominican literary counterparts, their work also implicates the ways in which the American cultural imaginary is similarly silent about atrocities committed in countries such as the Dominican Republic.⁵ In their respective ways, Álvarez and Díaz provide critical testimony to past and present abuses while advancing storytelling as a means of preventing future atrocities. Their creative approach to commissioning the truth creates a space for literature in the process of political transition, where memory, trauma, and history cannot be fully expressed in conventional human rights reports where facts take priority.⁶

These writers can thus be described as performing the work of a truth commission, articulating “truths” that reinforce the humanity of those who have been victimized by the state. Viewing their novels as performative truth commissions that replicate, to a limited extent, the discovery and articulation of “truth” found in officially sanctioned commissions is productive for understanding not only how literature can serve as an alternative pathway to memory but also how it can challenge assumptions of “truth” that enable a critique of the truth-commission process. Like official truth commissions, these novels expose and document atrocities by subverting the hegemonic narrative of oppressive rule. Whereas Álvarez’s novel focuses on the past and the sacrifices that her characters, the real-life Mirabal sisters, made in attaining freedom for the Dominican Republic of the present, Díaz questions the degree of “freedom” that exists in the country and elucidates the continuation of human rights abuses by the state.

In this way, the two novels reflect the phases of the transitional justice movement in which they were published: Álvarez’s novel (published in 1994) conveys the optimism that accompanied the rise of the truth commission in the late 1980s and early 1990s; Díaz’s novel (published in 2007) articulates a critique of the “democracy” that transitional justice efforts were intended to engender.⁷ Whereas Álvarez’s work attempts to make the dead speak—as is the case in conventional truth commissions—Díaz’s work illustrates the problem inherent in the teleological narrative of progress espoused by truth commissions. Through his discussion of *fukú*, a traumatic curse that haunts the characters of *Oscar Wao*,

Díaz expresses the legacy of violence that truth commissions, as “transitional” justice mechanisms, cannot address.

Reading Díaz’s novel alongside Álvarez’s is critical to understanding the complexity of the Dominican Republic’s fukú story (which did not end with Trujillo’s assassination). Both authors engage with the testimonial process to humanize their characters and, arguably, express a form of democracy—the multiple narrators that populate each text can be viewed as active citizens engaged in the process of creating a story. By letting their characters speak, Álvarez and Díaz decenter their authorial voices and complicate the creation of a single, authoritative story. Thus, what comes to separate these novels from the work of truth commissions is not necessarily the line between fiction and fact (“truth” or Truth) but how each performs the process of democracy in the act of storytelling. While many truth commissions attempt to construct a new authoritative history to avoid crisis and facilitate reconciliation, these novels problematize this impulse and emphasize the connection between narrative construction and dictatorial rule. In so doing, they illustrate the limiting influence of state violence on the perspective of commissioning bodies that often incorporate multiple voices but bind these voices within a certain narrative, geographical space, and moment in time. The change that these novels promote is not confined to the Dominican Republic of the past but rather encompasses the transnational relationship between the Dominican Republic and the United States in the present. Whereas Álvarez engages with her American readership to bear witness to the Mirabal sisters’ legacy and articulate a history marginalized in the United States, Díaz footnotes the Mirabal sisters and highlights other voices in Dominican and American history that have been repressed. Both authors illuminate how an official position of silence is subverted by individuals through the collective practice of storytelling and how this practice, in turn, becomes a way of commissioning the truth outside the prevailing political narrative. In this way, Álvarez and Díaz model a sustainable form of justice that dynamically confronts the legacy of human rights abuse through the generative power of stories.

A Window Case for Gender Justice: Julia Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*

In being “victim-centered,” truth commissions are arguably a mechanism for humanization as much as for justice. Indeed, the recognition that commissioning bodies give to the horrific experiences of their participants is an acknowledgment not only of abuse but also of these individuals’ humanity. That is, truth commissions emphasize that acts of violence perpetrated against individuals are wrong, not only because these acts violate the rule of law but also because these individuals are human beings who are entitled to basic human rights. In this sense, the

“restorative justice” that truth commissions offer is the ability to restore both a society and the common humanity shared by that society. The task of restoring this humanity, however, is a lengthy and difficult process. A repeated observation of truth commissions is that they typically have lofty goals but limited resources. In many cases, there are several victims’ stories to be told, yet the process of hearing a story, recording it, and contextualizing it within a larger report takes considerable labor. Indeed, truth commissions may not be feasible in some situations because, despite the political will, states lack the resources to form a commission and hear the numerous stories from victims. Often, there are more victims than people who can document their stories. As a way of overcoming this challenge, truth commissions may be selective in deciding what stories to hear and publicize. In the South African TRC, for example, certain events were chosen as “window cases.” Participants—both victim and perpetrator alike—were asked to testify as to what happened in these cases. These window cases allowed for an in-depth and focused examination of select stories that could be seen as representative of “broader patterns of abuse” (Shea 20).

In Álvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies*, the assassination of the Mirabal sisters (Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa or Mate) on 25 November 1960 can be viewed as a window case that Álvarez uses to examine the human rights abuses committed by the Trujillo regime, particularly those abuses perpetrated against women. Killed while driving home from visiting their wrongfully imprisoned husbands, the sisters—known in the underground as “Las Mariposas” (The Butterflies)—were found at the bottom of a steep cliff, their deaths reported as “accidental.”⁸ While accounts of what happened to the sisters differ, Trujillo’s hand in this “accident” was an open secret that would contribute to his own undoing.

The outcry that followed the assassination of the Mirabal sisters speaks to the complex role gender played in the politics of Trujillo’s regime. During his dictatorship, women—especially beautiful women, as the Mirabals were purported to be—were largely portrayed as sexual conquests. As Lauren Derby discusses, the popular sexualization of women in Trujillo’s regime contributed to the masculinization of the dictator’s image; this masculinization, in turn, enhanced his mythology as a leader. The conquest of women was thus critical to Trujillo’s “accumulation of symbolic capital,” as his “power was based as much on the consumption of women through sexual conquest as it was on the domination of enemies of state” (1113).

The Mirabal sisters are compelling for how they fit within this broader narrative of Trujillo, the seducer. Minerva Mirabal is rumored to have slapped Trujillo for making sexual advances to her (an event that is depicted in Álvarez’s novel), although whether this slap actually occurred is disputed. It is, however, within this narrative of sexual rejection that the Mirabal sisters’ deaths are often contextualized. The way in which this act of rejection becomes connected with the

complex brutality of Trujillo's regime not only reinforces the connection between his sexual prowess and the power he held but also speaks to a mythology that reduces the gender issues in the Dominican Republic to Trujillo's sexual appetite. The three Mirabal sisters were not assassinated because of sexual rejection but because of their active involvement in the Fourteenth of June Movement, a resistance organization that sought to overthrow Trujillo. What is often reproduced in the retelling of the Mirabal sisters' story is what occurs on a larger scale in truth commissions: understandings of gender violence are typically limited to sexual assault alone, with the complex forms of oppression that women face in authoritarian regimes reduced to a narrative where they are only victims that lack agency.⁹

As a window case, then, the Mirabal sisters' story has the potential to complicate this frame of sexual violence that often permeates discussions of their deaths and the forms of oppression that women experienced under Trujillo's regime. Álvarez's fictionalization of their lives restores their agency so that they are not just "victims" or "martyrs" but human beings capable of acting rather than being acted on. Her innovative approach to retelling the sisters' lives represents a radical departure from other works written about the sisters, which have been primarily nonfictional biographies written in Spanish by men.¹⁰ Conscious of the potential charges of "betrayal" her work might incite, Álvarez's postscript to her novel explains her reasons for representing their lives in this way:

And so it is that what you find in these pages are not the Mirabal sisters of fact, or even the Mirabal sisters of legend. The actual sisters I never knew, nor did I have access to enough information or the talents and inclinations of a biographer to be able to adequately record them. As for the sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth, they were finally also inaccessible to me. I realized, too, that such deification was dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant. And ironically, by making them myth, we lost the Mirabals once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women. (324)

Since one of Álvarez's stated purposes for writing this novel was to "bring acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers" (324), this postscript seems to be as much about informing English-speaking readers about the Mirabal sisters as guarding against potential critiques from Dominican readers already familiar—and presumably protective—of the sisters' story. In this postscript, she suggests that the Mirabal sisters have already become characters of fiction in another sense; they have, as she notes, become "sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth." Such fictionalization, she argues, means that they have become dehumanized, stripped of the qualities that enabled them to face the challenges of Trujillo's dictatorship.

Álvarez thus posits her work as a restorative act, a way to retrieve the Mirabals from *les lieux de memoire*, the external archive of memory, and make them not

only accessible but also human.¹¹ As she states, “So what you will find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up, but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals” (124). The restoration of their “real” spirit (which is to say, their humanity) is facilitated through her negotiation of fact and fiction. This negotiation, as Kelli Lyon Johnson asserts, is not about blending the two to create a unified story but rather articulating the “multiplicity of both the Dominican past and present” (80). Álvarez presents the sisters’ stories as a series of intersecting narratives, with each narrative presenting the point-of-view of one sister: that of Dedé, the only surviving sister, is told in third person except for the epilogue, which is told in first person; Minerva’s and Patria’s narratives are both told in first person; and María Teresa’s is told through a series of diary entries. These narratives are divided into three sections—each of which begin with Dedé’s narrative in the present (1994)—and span different times: the first section covers the sisters’ childhood and young adulthood (1930s to mid-1940s); the second section covers their lives as young women (late 1940s to 1950s); and the final section covers the year of their untimely deaths (1960). The novel ends with Dedé’s first-person epilogue staged in the present and a postscript from Álvarez. In these individual narratives, Álvarez imagines and invents the lives of each sister up until the assassination while basing certain events on well-known incidents.

In shuttling between narrators, Álvarez gives each sister a limited space to speak; what results from this limitation mirrors the kind of targeted glimpses that truth commission hearings and reports provide. In this way, what Álvarez produces is distinct from a *testimonio*, another genre concerned with “truth” and documenting atrocities to promote social and political change. Whereas a *testimonio* typically focuses on the “life” or a significant life experience” of a “real protagonist or witness” to atrocities (Beverley 25), Álvarez’s novel, by intercutting narrative threads, precludes the emergence of a protagonist and thereby a sustained view of a single life or life experience. This fragmentation of voice articulates a sense of incompleteness, which not only reinforces the tragedy of the ending but also the urgency to continue the story. What is important, then, about the individual stories in Álvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (and in truth commissions, as well) is how they contribute to a collective understanding of an experience (or what Johnson describes as “collective memory” [81]). What ultimately becomes reinforced in this democratic performance is a pluralistic vision of humanity, in which “humanity” is enunciated by both collective and individual voices.

This humanity, as Álvarez’s work suggests, cannot be conveyed simply by the facts of the sisters’ stories; rather, its complexity requires a careful embellishment of these facts that nonetheless remains true to the sisters’ “spirit.” What becomes important in Álvarez’s novel is not so much what the sisters did but who they were; in focusing on their personalities, Álvarez creates meaning that gives purpose to their actions. In this way, Álvarez establishes two forms of fictionalization:

one that exaggerates the truth to create myth and one that imagines the truth to create empathy. The difference between these forms is critical to Álvarez's endeavor, as it is the former that contributed to Trujillo's power and allowed him to maintain his rule for thirty-plus years ("the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant" [Álvarez, *In* 324]). Her novel can therefore be viewed as an attempt to deconstruct both the mythology of the sisters and the act of mythologizing through storytelling, the logic of which can create new tyrants even after the old ones are gone.

The presence of multiple narrators in Álvarez's work is therefore not only critical in humanizing the Mirabals but also in elucidating how the imposition of a single narrative is tied to the project of dictatorship. As Alvarez states in an author's note at the end of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, "One of the first things that happens in a dictatorship is that books are confiscated, people are not permitted to congregate and share ideas and stories. There is one official story, one reason to gather together, and that is for indoctrination" (332). Her resistance to producing an "official narrative" results in the stylistic destabilization of her authorial voice, which is performed through the fragmentation of the novel into multiple narrative voices and through the depiction of the *gringa dominicana*, a figure who articulates the limitations of Álvarez's knowledge. It is likely due to Álvarez's self-conscious disruption of the narrative voice that scholars have sought to name and categorize Álvarez's work within a genre or particular movement. Some scholars such as Concepción Bados Círia, Isabel Dulfano, and Nereida Segura-Rico have argued that Álvarez's novel is a *testimonio* or a new form of *testimonio*.¹² Other scholars have called her novel a work of "historiographic metafiction" (Brown), a "hagiographic commemorafiction" (Hickman), and a "*falsa cronica*" (Puleo 11), categorizations that highlight the significance of "truth" in the construction of "genre." What I want to emphasize is how Álvarez's novel disrupts generic dependency on "truth" in a way that problematizes the "truth commission" as a form of narration in which truth determines convention. "Truth," as Álvarez's novel shows, is an unstable boundary marker, one that she engages with in the representation of her doppelganger, *la gringa dominicana*. The presence of this character in Dedé's narrative sections expresses Álvarez's anxiety as someone not only speaking for the dead but also attempting to represent the "truth" of their experiences. While Ruth Behar and Shara McCallum criticize the less active role the *gringa dominicana* plays in the narrative, I suggest that her minimal role is a way for Álvarez to reflexively comment on her authorship yet limit its intervention within the narrative frame. After all, it is the reflexivity that Álvarez demonstrates in these pages that ultimately separates the fictionality of the storyteller and the fictionality of the dictator (a point that Díaz later explores in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*).

Through the *gringa dominicana*, Álvarez creates an ironic awareness that speaks to her limitations—as a diasporic Dominican American—in terms of telling the “full story” of the sisters:

Could the woman please come over and talk to Dedé about the Mirabal sisters? She is originally from here but has lived many years in the States, for which she is sorry since her Spanish is not so good. The Mirabal sisters are not known there, for which she is also sorry for it is a crime that they should be forgotten, these unsung heroines of the underground, et cetera. (*In 3*)

This passage simultaneously presents a disclaimer to bilingual Dominicans for why the novel is written in English and articulates the purpose of writing this story (namely, to spread the story of the Mirabal sisters to the States).¹³ The way this passage is phrased shows the awkwardness of communication between Dedé and the *gringa dominicana*, as the words “not so good” and “et cetera” reproduce the feel of a rough translation. While the *gringa dominicana* is clearly trying to convey her earnestness in talking about the sisters, the phrase “unsung heroines” implicates the kind of generic mythology that undercuts the sincerity of her endeavor. Here, not only does “et cetera” allude to what the *gringa dominicana* is unable to say (her Spanish not being “so good”) but also it implies how the sisters’ accomplishments have become rote, at least in a Dominican context.

Given that Álvarez’s non-Spanish-speaking / English-speaking audience may not know what “et cetera” refers to, this placeholder serves to stimulate interest as it critiques the way in which the sisters have become one-dimensional, “unsung heroines” whose accomplishments have been reduced to “et cetera” in the retelling of their story. Moreover, Dedé’s initial descriptions of her family employ superficial adjectives that the novel attempts to flesh out in the succeeding chapters:

“Yes, so different. Minerva was always into her wrongs and rights.” Dedé realizes she is speaking to the picture of Minerva, as if she were assigning her a part, pinning her down with a handful of adjectives, the beautiful, intelligent, high-minded Minerva. “And María Teresa, *ay, Dios*,” Dedé signs, emotion in her voice in spite of herself. “Still a girl when she died, *pobrecita*, just turned twenty-five.” Dedé moves on to the last picture and rights the frame. “Sweet Patria, always her religion was so important.”

“Always?” the woman says, just the slightest challenge in her voice.

“Always,” Dedé affirms, used to this fixed, monolithic language around interviewers and mythologizers of her sisters. “Well, almost always.” (6-7)

This passage establishes the types of women these sisters are mythologized as being, the “ideal women” that Isabel Zakrzewski Brown critiques as contributing to their “remythification” (110). Yet in this passage is the “slightest challenge” to

these myths, as Álvarez implicitly critiques the way that remembrance has solidified these sisters' personalities. The static quality of the picture frames suggests that they are, to a certain extent, frozen in the past, a point reaffirmed by Dedé's ironic awareness ("Dedé realizes she is speaking to the picture of Minerva, as if she were assigning her a part"). Rather than stopping at the images evoked in these frames, Álvarez uses them as an entry point into the narratives that complicate the sisters' portrayals as "beautiful, intelligent, high-minded" (Minerva), young and innocent (María Teresa or Mate), and religious (Patria).

The deconstruction of the sisters' mythology arguably begins here, as the small rhetorical indication of uncertainty ("Well, almost always") begins the process of breaking down the narratives constructed around them. This point marks a moment of crisis for Dedé, as the *gringa dominicana's* "challenge" becomes a turning point, an essential transition that enables the "fixed, monolithic" (7) narrative to fragment into multiple narratives. As the novel progresses, moreover, the *gringa dominicana's* identity changes into the "interview woman" (64), a less derogatory name that speaks to the gradual dissolution of the border between "insider" and "outsider." This border becomes further diminished through the series of first-person narratives that follow Dedé's initial narrative; in this way, Álvarez closes the distance between the audience and the sisters by changing the audience's perspective from voyeur (established in the opening scene with Dedé) to confidant. Álvarez thus tells Minerva's, María Teresa's, and Patria's stories in first person not only to evoke the feel of an intimate correspondence but also to retrieve their voices from the past and make them seem "present." The contrast in voice between Dedé's narratives and her sisters' allows the individuality of their voices to emerge and gives the effect of a "flashback," in which Dedé's opening section gives way to a break in memory where Minerva's, María Teresa's, and Patria's voices emerge to give testimony. Thus, the narratives that follow Dedé's framing narrative in each section work to disrupt the "fixed, monolithic language" (7) that has typified the retelling of the sisters' stories so far. Given that Dedé herself employs some of this fixed, monolithic language in the opening chapter of the novel, the rest of the chapters could be viewed as in dialogue with this language, breaking it down and subverting the way it undermines the human side of the sisters.

The established heroism of the sisters presents a particular challenge for Álvarez, as her admiration of them arguably detracts from her ability to represent their development. Given her prominence in the Fourteenth of June Movement, Minerva perhaps becomes the most one-dimensional as the novel progresses, with instances of early heroism at school foreshadowing her later activist efforts.¹⁴ Her headstrong persona remains the least changed throughout the trajectory of the novel, which is likely due to the way that she among the sisters has been uniquely mythologized in the literature about the Mirabals.¹⁵ From her famous slap to her legendary three arrests, she is the figure that commonly appears as

the key protagonist in film adaptations of the Mirabal sisters' lives (including one based on Álvarez's novel).¹⁶ Indeed, Silvio Sirias argues that Minerva emerges as the novel's "strongest character," which he argues is "a reflection of Dominican history—a history that considers her the intellect and the heart behind the Butterflies' opposition to Trujillo" (58).

Minerva's strength becomes a point of contrast with her sisters, particularly the youngest one, María Teresa. This contrast is reinforced by the difference in narrative styles between the sisters (Minerva's being directly addressed to the audience, María Teresa's being presented as "found" material—diary entries, pictures, and OAS [Organization of American States] Committee testimony). Toward the end of the novel, Minerva and María Teresa become foils for one another as their joint imprisonment emphasizes their distinct roles in the movement: Minerva as leader, María Teresa as follower. Among the narratives, María Teresa's is the most generically diverse and the only one that principally relies on an epistolary structure, spanning diary entries addressed to the "Little Book" that she writes as a young girl, to journal entries addressed to no one in particular and written as an adult in prison. In comparison to Minerva, whose voice remains more or less consistent throughout the narrative, María Teresa's narrative arguably shows the most superficial growth; her youthful diary entries transform in content as the novel grows progressively darker and she is imprisoned for her work in the underground. While Álvarez emphasizes Minerva's heroism, she strives to highlight the ordinariness of María Teresa, whose ending testimony articulates the latter's underlying strength. In doing so, Álvarez makes María Teresa relatable in ways that Minerva is not to articulate the ability of "ordinary" people to implement change.

Why Álvarez chooses to represent María Teresa's narrative in an epistolary style is therefore connected to the later testimony María Teresa alone gives. By having María Teresa communicate to the audience through a series of diary entries, Álvarez encourages readers to empathize with her in much the same way that epistolary novels in the eighteenth century fostered empathy with their readers. As Lynn Hunt states, "By its very form . . . the epistolary novel was able to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of 'interiority' (having an inner core), for the characters express their inner feelings in their letters" (48). The way that epistolary novels articulate the "interiority" of characters encourages identification and, in a different way than first-person narrative, promotes an intimate correspondence that assumes equality among readers. In this way, epistolary novel authors "created a vivid sense of reality precisely because their authorship was obscured within the letters' exchange"; this "vivid sense of reality," in turn, "made possible a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real, not fictional" (Hunt 42). In the context of Álvarez's novel, this epistolary structure reinforces that María Teresa was a real person and makes her a figure to empathize with, thereby strengthening the emotional impact of her testimony for the

“OAS Committee investigating Human Rights Abuses” (Álvarez, *In* 254) that ends her last narrative section.¹⁷

María Teresa’s OAS testimony is provided prior to Minerva’s last chapter, which narrates the events leading up to the sisters’ deaths. The testimony foreshadows the harm that would later come to the sisters while also speaking to the limited power of human rights organizations to prevent atrocity. In the novel, the arrival of representatives from the OAS is anticipated throughout María Teresa’s final narrative, as it is believed that OAS sanctions will ensure Trujillo’s fall. When OAS representatives do eventually come, María Teresa is chosen by the guards to give testimony. While Minerva wants her to secretly give two written statements to the OAS, a personal one and one on behalf of the Fourteenth of June Movement, María Teresa resists the idea of potentially implicating the one guard who is their friend, as any statement given and traced to her would ensure his death. María Teresa ultimately gives the statement from the Fourteenth of June Movement to the OAS but withholds the personal statement to avoid potentially harming her friend. This small act of resistance marks her growth in the novel, but it also speaks to the narratives that go unheard and unread by the OAS. In this way, Álvarez shows how human rights reports may only give part of a larger story. Literature, in contrast, can intervene in this incomplete story by continuing the storytelling process and providing justice to those whose abuses remain invisible despite the practice of human rights reporting.

In this omitted testimony, María Teresa narrates being taken to La 40, the prison where her husband is, and being tortured in front of him so that he will do something for Trujillo. This narrative is reproduced on the page with some names redacted, as María Teresa explains that she “blotted out some names” because she was afraid of “getting innocent people in trouble” (254). Because readers know the identity of the person giving testimony, they can easily discern some names, such as her husband’s, given the context of what is being said. Even with this information, not all the blanks on the page can be filled in. The redacted names thus serve as placeholders that allude, in their blankness, to the multitude of people who also suffered in the Dominican Republic during this time. Moreover, María Teresa’s act of “blotting out” the names symbolizes the dehumanizing process of torture, which similarly “blots out” the identities of the victims. The only names that María Teresa provides in this account are the names of her torturers, “tall fat Johnny with his Hitler mustache,” “[t]he one called Candido with the curly hair,” and “a bug-eyed one that kept cracking his knuckles to make the sounds of breaking bones,” whom she refers to as “Bug Eye” (254-55).¹⁸ In contrast to the succinct reporting that characterizes the OAS’s reports on the Dominican Republic in 1965, 1966, and 1999, where incidents are described in the briefest terms, María Teresa’s testimony is graphic in detail. Compare, for example, the following excerpts from the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights (IACHR) 1966 Dominican Republic country report and María Teresa's testimony:

IACHR Report on La Victoria Penitentiary:¹⁹

On November 12, 1965, the Commission visited La Victoria national penitentiary because of denunciations received regarding the arbitrary detention of 506 farmers. . . . The Commission ascertained that these minors were being held under deplorable conditions and that the conditions of the prison in general were very bad, with a lack of medical care and medicine.

María Teresa's OAS Testimony:

Bug Eye stood before me, holding a rod with a little switch. When he touched me with it, my whole body jumped with exquisite pain. I felt my spirit snapping loose, soaring above my body and looking down at the scene. I was about to float off in a haze of brightness when Leandro cried out, I'll do it, I'll do it! (Álvarez, *In* 255-56)

While not taken from the same time period as María Teresa's testimony, the IACHR report nonetheless provides a sense of how cases, such as María Teresa's, might have been recorded. In the IACHR report, the prison conditions are described as "very bad, with a lack of medical care and medicine." This "very bad" is vague and does not quite convey what is meant by "deplorable conditions." In contrast, María Teresa describes her torture in detail ("I felt my spirit snapping loose"), a description that ultimately stands in for the atrocities that the sisters later endure, although the extent of these atrocities remains unknown.²⁰

What emerges in this contrast between these two forms of human rights reporting is the ability of literature to intervene and give substance to the "bare facts" that often state the "truth" but do not fully convey it. While this ability does not make literature superior to human rights reports, which are also critical to engendering legal and political changes, it demonstrates that there is a place for the literary in the truth-telling process. Álvarez's novel presents an important insight into this process, one that suggests that facts alone cannot restore humanity to those who have been denied it. While creativity may be viewed as undermining the objective of a truth commission, the formal ways in which Álvarez constructs her narrative problematizes the complicity of narrative power in reinforcing authoritarianism and shows the possibilities for disrupting this coercive process.

In the epilogue to the novel, Dedé recalls a reception that she attended in honor of her sisters and her reunion with Lío, a man who long ago introduced her and her sister Minerva to the resistance efforts against Trujillo. Dedé describes a conversation between them, in which they discuss the progress that has been made since her sisters died:

And bless his heart, he takes my hands and says, "The nightmare is over, Dedé. Look at what the girls have done." He gestures expansively.

He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now the playground of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields. The cemetery is beginning to flower. (318)

As Dedé looks around the reception, she notes how to the others “we are characters in a sad story about a past that is over.” Yet, she thinks to herself, “[t]he nightmare is over; we are free at last. . . . Was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies” (318)? While this scene asserts that “the nightmare is over,” it contradicts this sentiment by leaving the question of progress in the Dominican Republic open-ended. The key example of progress cited—that the country is now “the playground of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields”—suggests a certain emptiness to the sisters’ sacrifice. Indeed, even the most critical sign of progress, free elections, is arguably as empty a victory as the island’s new “playground” identity. At the time that Álvarez was writing this novel, Trujillo’s puppet and successor Balaguer was president, having been reelected to the position in 1986 and 1994.²¹ His rule was characterized by oppression and neo-Trujillian tactics that further eroded the rule of law in the Dominican Republic.

Thus, when Dedé affirms at the end that she “survived to tell the story” (321), there is a sense that the story has not ended, that Lío’s assertion that “[t]he nightmare is over” (318) is part of the official narrative of progress that overlooks the persistence of atrocity. Indeed, as David Howard writes, “Contrary to paradisiacal images of Caribbean beach life, the region is one of the most urbanised on earth and increasingly among the most violent outside current ‘war zones’” (726). The continuation of violence in the country raises the question of whether the implementation of a transitional justice mechanism, rather than the policy of *borrón y cuenta nueva*, would have prevented this development. In rebuilding the country’s social contract through selective amnesia, the Dominican government has arguably allowed systemic forms of violence established in Trujillo’s era to continue, particularly violence against women. In this way, the Mirabal sisters, in becoming monuments and myths to mourn (rather than melancholically retain), have become part of a collective memory that is rooted in forgetting.

Into the “Killing Fields”: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

If the Mirabal sisters’ sacrifice seems relatively empty at the end of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* examines why this might be so, addressing the persistence of atrocity in the Dominican Republic several decades after Trujillo’s assassination. Focusing on the marginalized rather than the political and economic elite, such as the Mirabals, he complements

Álvarez's story by concentrating on those pushed out of view in conventional "window cases." Like Álvarez's novel, Díaz's has been hard to categorize. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has been described as a "historical fantasy" (Saldívar), a "foundational romance" (Machado Sáez), a "marvelous history" (Lanzendörfer), a "counter-dictatorial zafa" (Vargas 11), and a "historiographic battle royal" (Hanna 504). As the generic references to "history" suggest, Díaz's novel is frequently understood as a subversive historical text, one that counters dominant Dominican, American, and Caribbean narratives in its infusion of fantasy, incorporation of nerd genres and "nerdspeak," and invocation of magical realism (or postmagical realism).²² In the context of transitional justice scholarship, where "history" is frequently a narrative that truth commissions work to rewrite, I argue that Díaz's novel performs generic border-crossings to undermine the power of narrative convention. That is, if genre signals a consensus that makes disparate elements cohere, Díaz works to fragment this consensus as a way of contesting the coherence of "history" and, more specifically, the "truth" that this history conveys.

Just as Mate's OAS testimony articulates what is redacted in conventional human rights reports, Díaz's novel works to mine the silences in Dominican and American histories to recover a space for those who have been "blotted out" by gender and racial difference. The characters in his novel do not conform to the heteronormativity of Dominican masculinity (Oscar) or to racialized ideas of beauty (Beli). In changing the window case to examine those marginalized in the Dominican Republic and the United States, Díaz emphasizes the gendered and racialized aspects of violence that permeate these "democracies." Díaz's transnational narrative thus connects the atrocities committed in the United States and the Dominican Republic in a way that emphasizes the shortcomings of nationally restricted truth commissions. In doing so, his novel suggests that the window cases created by stories such as that of the Mirabals depict an incomplete picture of atrocity not only by remaining focused on the past but also by limiting who is positioned within this frame. As he demonstrates in his discussion of fukú, or what he calls "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1), the trauma of human rights abuses does not just dissipate with the passage of time. Díaz's reference here to the "New World" speaks to the lasting effects of colonialism and positions the experiences in the novel within the larger cultural force of diaspora, specifically the black diaspora. The concepts of fukú and zafa (which is presented as the counterspell to fukú) serve—much like the ship does in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993)—as chronotopic devices that underscore the migratory patterns of trauma and the storytelling that arises from it.²³

In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator emphasizes that "the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare" (2). The fukú, in other words, is a counterpoint to the idea expressed by Lío in Álvarez's

novel that “the nightmare is over” (*In* 318). The fukú, as the narrator in Díaz’s novel asserts, does not adhere to a particular temporal scale: “Sometimes [the fukú] works patiently, drowning a nigger by degrees, like with the Admiral or the U.S. in paddies outside of Saigon. Sometimes it’s slow and sometimes it’s fast. It’s doom-ish in that way, makes it harder to put a finger on, to brace yourself against” (2). The fukú becomes a magical way of articulating the persistent trauma of the Dominican Republic and the United States, where events such as Kennedy’s assassination are attributed to the fukú. As the fukú is connected to storytelling (“[e]verybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family” [5]), the way to counter the fukú, the novel posits, is to pit “like against like,” or a story against a story. The novel is thus presented as a *zafa* to the fukú story of Oscar, a diasporic “ghetto nerd” whose life is cut short—much like the Mirabals’ were purported to be—in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic.²⁴ Through this particular fukú story, Díaz shows how the fukú continues to afflict the Dominican Republic and the United States, staging a dialogue with Álvarez (and other authors) to enunciate a “*zafa* of sorts” (7), one that counters the fukú by articulating how “the nightmare” is not “over.”

Díaz’s novel contextualizes the tragedy that ends Oscar’s life within the larger traumatic history of his family, shifting back and forth in time to show the manifestations of fukú in each generation of the Cabral family. The novel alternates between the Dominican Republic and New Jersey, beginning with Oscar’s childhood and adolescence (1974-84) and then moving backward in time to the stories of Oscar’s mother, Hypatia Belicia Cabral (Beli) (1955-62), and his grandfather, Abelard (1944-46). These narratives are interconnected with stories about Lola (told in first person) as well as stories about the relationship between the narrator and Oscar. While the novel does not initially identify the narrator, he is eventually revealed to be Yuniór, a character with the same name (and possibly the same identity) as the protagonist of Díaz’s debut short story collection, *Drown* (1996).²⁵ Whereas the character of Yuniór in *Drown* is a young boy dealing with his father’s adultery and abandonment, in this novel Yuniór is an adult, a reformed womanizer who tells Oscar’s story because “[i]t just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat” (6).

This coercive image is significant in terms of the relationship that Yuniór articulates between the dictator and writer. As Yuniór states, “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*” (97). In stating that this story has “its fingers around [his] throat,” Yuniór highlights similarities in the power of dictatorship and the power of writing: that is, both exert a force over their subjects to bend them to their will. Moreover, while the force that Yuniór speaks to is metaphorical in ways that the force of dictatorship is not, the power that writers wield is arguably more insidious than that of a dictator,

as the subtlety of this power belies its ability to inform and shape one's worldview. In rejecting the notion that "tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists," Yuniór asserts that scribblers are tyrants by another name. In this way, the cliché that ends his sentiment ("Like, after all, recognizes like" [97]) reaffirms the "tyrannical" way that writers have shaped our discourse. The line that separates a writer and dictator is like the line that separates zafa from fukú; in the story, it is difficult to determine sometimes which is which.²⁶ In the context of the truth commission, however, it is this line on which political transition depends. Put another way, the novel centers on a key problematic in truth commissions, which is how they can effectively tell the "truth" in a way that does not reproduce the logic of authoritarianism.²⁷

Conscious of the way that "dictators . . . can be highly accomplished storytellers" (Patteson 6), Díaz thus disrupts the authority of Yuniór's narrative, constricting his authorial "fingers" around the latter's "throat" through footnotes that detract from the dominance of the story on the page and allusions that decenter the authorial voice. On the one hand, both these footnotes and allusions are performative gestures that bolster the ethos and authority of the narrator; on the other hand, they create a tension with Yuniór's primary narrative as these multiple narratives (the narratives in the footnotes, the narratives contained in the allusions, and Yuniór's narrative) compete to be the "authoritative" voice in the novel.²⁸ The academic tone of the footnotes is one that Álvarez also adopts in the postscript to her novel, which provides historical context for the Mirabal sisters' story. Yet, even as Yuniór performs the work of the academic, diligently footnoting history that his readers may be unaware of, this performance is one that notably pushes the "two seconds of Dominican history" (Díaz 2) to the margins of the page.²⁹ Through this move, Díaz acknowledges the importance of this history while refocusing it on the intersecting stories of those underrepresented in its narrative. Thus, Díaz not only humanizes those who have historically been marginalized but also problematizes the power that this humanizing impulse gives the writer.

The strategies of narrative disruption that Díaz employs enable him to incorporate marginalized voices in the "official story" of the Dominican Republic, forming an alternative "truth commission" in the polyvocal enunciation of the fukú story.³⁰ Indeed, it is debatable who the protagonist of this story is, with some scholars, such as Elena Machado Sáez, arguing that Yuniór is the true protagonist and others, such as Jennifer Harford Vargas, arguing that Oscar is. How one perceives the protagonist, moreover, arguably changes how transgressive the novel is, with Machado Sáez arguing against the scholarly trend in Latina/o studies to assert the ways in which its politics domesticate Oscar's otherness.³¹

Instead of settling on a clear protagonist, the polyvocality of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, like that of Álvarez's novel, precludes the emergence of a single protagonist and articulates multiple truths that exist in tension with the

authoritative narration of the story. In contrast to Álvarez, however, those overlooked in Dominican history, such as Oscar and his mother, Beli, take center stage in the narrative, and those who are or have become highly visible in this history, such as the Mirabal sisters, are relegated to the margins of its pages. The Mirabal sisters are only mentioned four times in the novel, but where they are mentioned (twice in footnotes and twice in the text itself), and the role that they play in the narrative, is crucial to the displacement of “history” that Díaz is performing. While Díaz acknowledges the importance of the Mirabal sisters, he suggests that their story is not the only one worth telling by footnoting them. Critically, the Mirabal sisters act as foils for Beli, whose relative invisibility in Dominican history is contrasted with the sisters’ visibility. In contrast to the sisters, depicted in mythology as beautiful, young, and privileged, Beli is depicted as “the darkest character” in the story (Díaz 78), a characteristic that allows Díaz to address the racist undertones of the Dominican preference for whiteness. It is because Beli is, in fact, the “darkest character” that she is repressed from the narrative of Dominican history, much as Trujillo repressed his own Haitian lineage.³² In the novel, Beli is orphaned as a child because of the fukú and placed in a foster family that abuses her. Although Beli is eventually rescued from this family by La Inca, a cousin of Beli’s father, Abelard, her story is considerably less heroic than the sisters. Díaz highlights this contrast when Beli enters school and her experience is quite different from what Álvarez describes in her novel:

Let’s just say, by the end of her second quarter Beli could walk down the hall without fear that anyone would crack on her. The downside of this of course was that she was completely alone. (It wasn’t like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor scholarship student. No Miranda here: everybody shunned her.) (83)

The description of Beli’s marginalization here marginalizes the Mirabal sisters, who are described in an accompanying footnote as “the Great Martyrs of that period.” Clearly, in referring to the sisters as “the Great Martyrs,” Díaz is alluding to the official history of the Dominican Republic, in which their mythology predominates. His reference to Álvarez’s novel also suggests that Díaz, like Brown and Lynn Chun Ink, perceives her work as remythologizing these “Great Martyrs” in depicting the sisters as unrealistically virtuous. Moreover, although Díaz knows the names of the sisters and mentions them in the footnote (“Patria Mercedes, Minerva Argentina, and María Teresa—three beautiful sisters from Salcedo who resisted Trujillo and were murdered for it”), he states that there is “No Miranda here” (83). What looks like a mistake (it should be Minerva, as she is the one who “befriends the poor scholarship student”) is actually a careful slip, where Minerva’s name is replaced with an allusion to Miranda from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The slip here, from Minerva to Miranda, speaks to the way the former has become idealized and how this

idealization has removed from view the uglier aspects of Dominican history (as the ugliness of colonization and slavery is repressed in *The Tempest*).³³

These uglier aspects come to light the second time that the Mirabals are mentioned, after Beli is almost beaten to death for being impregnated by Trujillo's sister's husband, the Gangster. Similar to the account of the Mirabal sisters' murder (Diederich 70-71), Beli is also taken to the cane field and beaten, a parallel that the narrator points out in a footnote: "And where were the Mirabal Sisters murdered? In a canefield, of course" (Díaz 157). The significance of this violence against Beli is the way in which it articulates a different form of violence against women in Trujillo's regime, one that is not the consequence of the dictator's sexual appetite. When the Mirabals are mentioned again in the main narrative, Beli's beating is compared to the sisters' murder, showing how violence against women can cross class and racial boundaries: "After all, they had killed the world-famous Mirabal Sisters, who were of Name; what was to stop them from killing her poor orphaned negrita?" (156-57). Beli's and the Mirabal sisters' stories tell a different narrative of gender violence than "[t]he rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted" (144). These stories convey a brutality against women that cannot be reduced to their sexualization. In other words, the way that this violence crosses racial and class boundaries to afflict both those "of Name" and those marginalized by society suggests a complexity behind this violence that has been unexplored beyond a sexual narrative.

Importantly, this characteristic is not unique to stories about Trujillo of the "dictator" genre; indeed, in transitional justice literature and criminal tribunals, gender violence is often reduced to sexual violence. Díaz, however, illustrates the way that the clichéd narrative of "The Girl Trujillo Wanted" has obscured the complicated manifestation of violence in the Dominican Republic, which, as the death of Oscar demonstrates, is not confined to the life of a dictator or the gender of a victim. Oscar's emasculated characterization ("he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock" [12]) implicates his complex gendered position in the novel, wherein his defiance of conventional Dominican masculinity makes him vulnerable to the violence that the reinforcement of this masculinity produces.³⁴

Thus, when Oscar is shot to death by policemen at the end of the novel, his death conveys not only the "truth" about what violent masculinities can engender but also the injustice that an eroded rule of law creates. His death is representative of the extrajudicial killings that occur with alarming frequency in the country, where, according to the US State Department's 2011 country report, "police [commit] 10 percent of all killings in the country." The circumstances of Oscar's death, in fact, resemble one case cited in this report:

According to AI [Amnesty International], police shot and killed 21-year-old Luis Alfredo Dominguez Rodriguez (known as "Felo") on January 26 in Nagua. His

friend Henry Ortiz, who was injured in the same incident, reported that four officers in a patrol car stopped them and without saying a word, shot him five times. Ortiz said an officer then shot Dominguez after one of the officers said they did not want a witness to the killing.

What is clear from Dominguez's case, and Oscar's, is that the fukú story continues in the Dominican Republic, where the "killing fields" have been concealed in the "playground of the Caribbean" (Álvarez, *In* 318). Importantly, the killing fields in the novel are cane fields, a symbol that evokes the multiple traumas of slavery, colonization, dictatorship, and American imperialism. As a backdrop for much of the violence in the novel, the cane fields are a reminder that the fukú cannot be reduced to Trujillo's reign; rather, this story involves a much more complex and dynamic history of violence between the United States and the Dominican Republic. As Yunior states in the beginning of the novel, "(Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq). A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the 'democratization' of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon" (Díaz 4). What Oscar's death at the end makes clear is how "democracy," as imposed by the United States, is not the zafa to Trujillo's fukú; indeed, Díaz's novel shows how the United States' "democratization" counterspell has become part of the Dominican Republic's fukú story. Ultimately, Díaz articulates that the line between dictatorship and "democracy," as with the line between dictators and writers, is not as antagonistic as one would like to believe: "*Like, after all, recognizes like*" (97).

Conclusion

At one point in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz notes that "Santo Domingo never became a democracy" (227). This line, a response to Abelard's failed prophesying about a future beyond Trujillo's dictatorship, articulates the "truth" that Álvarez's and Díaz's novels commission, one that extends beyond the atrocities they document and into subversive storytelling. In the absence of official transitional justice strategies in the Dominican Republic, these authors articulate a strategy of their own, a storytelling counterspell that subverts the sanctioned narratives of "democracy" expounded by the United States and the Dominican Republic. Rather than producing official narratives of their own or adopting the monolithic language of history, both authors choose the path of most disruption, expressing in their polyvocal narratives the complicated conflict of true democracy. In doing so, they expose a crucial weakness in truth commissions that seek to articulate a common narrative "truth" that can mythologize victims (such as the Mirabal sisters) and reinforce the marginalization of Others (such as Beli and Oscar). What Álvarez's and Díaz's novels promote is not just storytelling but a democratic form of storytelling, where allusions, multiple

narrators, footnotes, and paratextual corrections elucidate highly suspicious forms of narration that engage the reader in their creative articulations of “truth.” As these authors demonstrate, it is important to treat “truth” not as an object to be discovered (in other words, not an end in itself) but as a means of creating awareness and facilitating an ongoing dialogue.

In this way, Álvarez and Díaz complement traditional human rights reporting by not only providing a historical context for understanding the eroded rule of law in the Dominican Republic (Álvarez) but also by giving voice to those who have been disproportionately affected by its violence (Díaz). In showing the transnational effects of power, these writers emphasize the limiting perspective of human rights narratives (such as truth commissions and country reports) that focus on national forms of abuse. They both convey a nuanced portrait of abuse that, in contrast to such narratives, can allow for deeper insight into the human experience of violence than that which a circumscribed “window” can depict. Unbounded by the limitations of truth commissions, these novels suggest a place for literature to not only provide an alternative to authorized forms of remembrance and redress but also to create a sustainable form of justice, where a story does not necessarily end with its conclusion in a novel but continues in its retelling.

Notes

1. While many definitions of *transitional justice* exist, I have chosen to concisely define it here based on a set of shared, central characteristics. The literature on transitional justice is extensive, but Priscilla B. Hayner (*Unspeakable*) and Ruti G. Teitel provide excellent introductions to the concept.
2. In her study of contemporary Dominican literature, Maja Horn addresses the “troublesome misogyny and homophobia that often rear their heads in these texts” but also asks “what, beyond individual failings of the authors, [are] the larger political and theoretical implications of the recurrence of these gender discourses” (19). She concludes that these texts speak to a “homogenization of the Dominican national imaginary and flattening out and emptying of meaning of racial difference, but also of class and other forms of difference,” which has been “enabled greatly by notions of masculinity that became hegemonic under the Trujillato and that continue to play a pivotal role in spelling out differences and hierarchies within the national community” (141).
3. According to Joanna Quinn, “it was the Haitian diaspora community abroad that acted as policy entrepreneurs for the idea of establishing a truth commission in Haiti” (76). This community “participated [in the commission] from abroad, sending written accounts and coming to testify before the commission” (98).
4. See, for example, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and David J. Vázquez (*Triangulations*).

5. This criticism does not come without a price. For example, Díaz was recently called “unpatriotic” by the Dominican government and stripped of a merit award given in 2009 for campaigning for the rights of undocumented immigrants in the country (Walters). While this price is not as extreme as it was during Trujillo’s reign, when political scientist Jesús de Galíndez famously “disappeared” in New York, it symbolizes the government’s repressive stance toward criticism.
6. As Vázquez argues, “As a result of the real trauma inflicted on Dominicans in both the island and US contexts, a linear, univocal history of the nation can no longer be constructed” (“I” 384).
7. In describing Álvarez’s novel as “optimistic,” I am referring to the intent and purpose behind the text—namely, that the act of writing and reading such a text can produce “freedom fighters” (Álvarez, *In* 332). However, the text itself is more ambivalent on this point, and scholars such as Dalleo and Machado Sáez have read this particular novel in melancholic terms, with the narrator (Dedé) unable to move beyond this traumatic history in a disappointing post-Trujillo world (150).
8. A *Time* magazine article published shortly after the sisters’ deaths reports what *El Caribe*—a Dominican newspaper—stated about the deaths:

They [the Mirabal sisters] were found dead near the wreckage of a Jeep at the bottom of a 150-ft. cliff on the north coast of the tight little island. Said *El Caribe*: “The accident in which Driver Rufino Cruz and the sisters Patria Mirabal de Gonzáles, Minerva Mirabal de Tavárez and María Teresa Mirabal de Guzman died is presumed to have happened when Cruz lost control of the vehicle.” (“Warning”)

9. As Vasuki Nesiah et al. state, “when bodily injury is the focus [in a truth commission], women’s experience of human rights abuse is often reduced to sexual violence” (9). The problem with this emphasis, they note, is that “[w]hile sexual violence is critical, it does not capture the complex and multidimensional ways in which women experience abuse. Moreover, representing women’s violations as only sexual abuse perpetuates more widespread prejudices that reduce women to sexual beings alone” (10).
10. At the time that Álvarez published her book, two biographies of the sisters had been published: William Galvan’s *Minerva Mirabal: historia de una heroína* (1982) and Ramón Ferreras’s *Las Mirabal* (1982). Since the publication of Álvarez’s book, more biographies have been published, including one by Dedé Mirabal, *Vivas en su jardín: la verdadera historia de las hermanas Mirabal y su lucha por la libertad* (2009).
11. See Johnson’s excellent chapter on Julia Álvarez’s restoration of collective memory in *Julia Álvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* (2005).
12. While I disagree that it is a *testimonio*, I perceive this categorization of Álvarez’s novel as a way Latina/o studies scholars have responded to the problems of

- “truth” in *testimonio* writing (as exemplified by the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* [1984]). In other words, retheorizing the factual basis of *testimonio* writing and broadening the genre to accommodate fictional representations of history allows the field to retain the political power associated with this genre.
13. Much has been written about the audience for which Latina/o authors write and the function of Spanish in Latina/o literary works (see Dalleo and Machado Sáez and Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo). While, on one hand, Álvarez may be viewed as being a “native informant” for her non-Dominican audience, her performance is far more complex than such a characterization suggests. Indeed, my intention in broadening the context of Álvarez’s work to the field of human rights and literary studies is to elucidate the global implications of her storytelling, a Dominican cultural art (Álvarez, “Citizen” 20) that she translates into a social justice praxis.
 14. Minerva was a cofounder of this movement. See Piero Gleijeses’s *The Dominican Crisis: The 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt and American Intervention* (1978), especially appendix II.
 15. With the exception of Dedé’s autobiography, Minerva is the only one of the sisters to have a biography dedicated to her. See William Galván’s *Minerva Mirabal: Historia de una heroína* (1997).
 16. The film *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001) featured the most well-known actress of the cast, Salma Hayek, in Minerva’s role and focused mainly on Minerva.
 17. According to Isabel Zakrzewski Brown, the real María Teresa also kept a diary (109-10).
 18. The “Johnny” referred to here is likely Johnny Abbes Garcia, the head of SIM, the governmental intelligence office.
 19. This penitentiary is where María Teresa and Minerva were held.
 20. As the fictional Dedé says in the epilogue of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, “Over a year after Trujillo was gone, it all came out at the trial of the murderers. But even then, there were several versions. Each one of the five murderers saying the others had done most of the murdering” (Álvarez, *In* 302).
 21. According to Dedé Mirabal in *Vivas en su jardín*, Balaguer won the 1994 election fraudulently and agreed to only govern until 1996 (335).
 22. As Ramón Saldívar argues, “the story of the dispossessed takes the form of ‘historical fantasy’ and ‘speculative realism’ to signify the odd amalgam of historical novel, bildungsroman, postmagical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, and super-hero comic romance that structures the story of *Oscar Wao*” (585).
 23. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the *chronotope* to rethink the nationalistic frame of black cultural studies. For Bakhtin, the chronotope “is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (qtd. in Gilroy 225).

24. According to Bernard Diederich's version of the sisters' assassination, they were taken "[b]y a clump of sugar cane at the edge of a deep ravine" (70-71).
25. Machado Sáez argues that Díaz's novel is "a corrective to the critical reception of" *Drown* and "to definitions of authentic representation that critics brought to the stories." As she states, "Not only does *Oscar Wao* explore how these ideas about cultural authenticity are enforced, but also the translation of Yunior from the short stories to the novel emphasizes the Dominican Republic's history of dictatorship as the decisive element of shaping belonging" (523).
26. See, for example, the scene where Oscar's grandmother, Socorro, realizes that she is pregnant with Beli: "It was long after that visit that Socorro realized that she was pregnant. With Abelard's Third and Final Daughter. Zafa or Fukú? You tell me" (Díaz 242).
27. Scholars disagree about whether Yunior, as a narrator, reproduces this logic in the suppression of Oscar's queerness (Machado Sáez) or whether the novel "mitigates this problematic formally" in the staging of the conflict between fukú and zafa. As a problematic narrator who can be seen as "partially overdetermined by what he is critiquing," Yunior is instructive for exploring the role a narrator has in shaping "truth" (Vargas 10).
28. Machado Sáez advances a convincing argument that "The narrator maintains his anonymous, all-knowing persona up to the point that he is identified as Yunior; after revealing himself, the narrator is exposed as an imperfect and subjective source of information, and the footnotes become less frequent" (538). Other scholars have read these footnotes as part of a postmodernist tradition of "[destabilizing] the primary narrative so as to prove the futility of establishing a master narrative in the first place" (Graulund 36) or as forms of "undercover storytelling" (Vargas 20).
29. Yunior, it turns out, is an academic, as stated at the end of the novel when he notes that he "teach[es] composition and creative writing at Middlesex Community College" (Díaz 326). A tongue-in-cheek reference to the Modern Language Association conference, juxtaposed quite horrifically with Oscar's brutal beating, also indicates his "academic" identity: "It was like one of those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels: *endless*" (299).
30. Indeed, as Jennifer Harford Vargas points out, the novel relegates Trujillo to a minor character, in contradistinction to the popular "dictator" novels where this character would be the protagonist (11).
31. Machado Sáez complicates the subversiveness of Díaz's novel in her characterization of this work as a "foundational romance" for the Dominican American diaspora. According to Machado Sáez, "Because the formation of the Dominican diaspora was intimately tied to the violence that the Trujillo dictatorship used to forcibly silence opposing voices, *Oscar Wao* offers itself up as a foundational fiction of the Dominican diaspora, with all the positive and negative connotations that the term suggests" (526). Machado Sáez reads Yunior as

- suppressing the queerness of Oscar throughout the text: “While Oscar is endearingly inauthentic, Yuniór’s mission to identify him as a representative subject who can embody the Dominican diaspora leads him ultimately to silence Oscar’s points of queer Otherness—his virginity and sentimentality” (524).
32. Lauren Derby connects Trujillo’s repression of his Haitian lineage to his sexual appetite for the daughters of the bourgeoisie; as she states, “Rejected by the traditional white elite as a ruthless mulatto arriviste with Haitian (that is, black) lineage, Trujillo sought out the daughters of the bourgeoisie in his erotic forays as a means of humiliating the elite as well as insinuating himself into their circles” (1117).
 33. For a discussion of Miranda in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, see Jessica Slights and Laura E. Donaldson’s discussion of what she has termed “the Miranda complex.” Díaz’s reference to *The Tempest* here also is significant given the way this play has figured into discussions of colonization, particularly in the Caribbean. See, for example, Rob Nixon.
 34. This emasculation is also symbolized in Oscar’s allusive lineage: his grandfather’s name is Abelard, the same name as the philosopher who was famously castrated for entering into a secret love affair with Héloïse (King).

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