Erin Niederberger  
Advisor: Andrew Hoberek

“Filling in the Blanks: Ambiguity, Genre, and Reader Participation as Anti-Dictatorial Forces in Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao”

Junot Díaz’s novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao recounts the story of Dominican-American Oscar de León situated within a larger story consisting of his immigrant family’s past, the history of the Dominican Republic under its United States-backed dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, and an ancient curse known as the fukú. Yunior, another Dominican-American and an acquaintance of Oscar’s family living within the novel’s pages, narrates the story based on his own experience, research he conducts, and other efforts.

In this paper, I discuss Yunior’s storytelling as both an act of zafa - a countercurse taking the form of resistance against colonialism, dictatorship, and authoritarianism - and its own problematic act of control. Within the novel, Yunior recognizes the dictatorial nature inherent to a single narrator and attempts to counter it by leaving ambiguous spaces, sampling works of genre, and allowing other characters’ voices to be heard. However, this only creates another layer of illusion between the text and its real “dictator”, Díaz himself. To mitigate the inherent authoritarian danger of one storyteller, the novel demands readers complete the work of anti-dictatorial resistance by leaving portions unclear until readers actively work to learn and understand more. The novel uses its motif of blank spaces and the figure of the faceless man to identify readers’ interpretive responsibility as both perpetrators of and witnesses to violence. By placing them within its pages and challenging them to give their own meaning to the novel’s many páginas en blanco, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao enlists readers’ cooperation to avoid a single voice’s supremacy.