Transnational Latino/a Literature and the Transmodern Meta-Narrative: An Alternative Reading of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Sara Villamarín-Freire

A PARADIGM FOR A GLOBALIZED WORLD: DIMENSIONS OF THE TRANSMODERN PROJECT

Despite the relative novelty of the term, there are multiple definitions of what Transmodernity is, where it comes from, and where it is heading. In this article I will review some of these definitions, paying special attention to the version of Transmodernity developed by Enrique Dussel. I intend to explore the common ground between his interpretation of Transmodernity and the transnational approach to literature. I will focus on the particular case of transnational Latino/a literature and consider some of its defining features. I will argue that, depending on the motivations behind this type of approach, the transformative potential of in-between literatures such as Latino/a fiction might be eclipsed, since, as Winfried Fluck observes, the transnational cannot be wholly separated from the national from which it departs (366). Instead, I propose interpreting transnational Latino/a fiction through the lens of Transmodernity. Addressing transnational Latino/a fiction as transmodern fiction allows us to frame it within an alternative meta-narrative that foregrounds aspects otherwise overlooked or ignored by the still predominantly Western-biased episteme behind transnational approaches.

In her article "Visions of Transmodernity: A New Renaissance of our Human History?," Irena Ateljevic notes that Transmodernity's many definitions converge insofar as they all contemplate an "emerging higher collective consciousness" as a defining feature, a process Ateljevic describes in terms of "a major global mind change and paradigm shift" simultaneously taking place at the "socio-cultural, economic, political and philosophical" levels (200–1). Such a paradigm shift would lead to the overcoming of both Modernity and Postmodernity while "drawing elements from each" (203); or, as Marc Luyckx puts it, Transmodernity "means keeping the best of modernity," but also implies "going beyond it" (972).

The same conception has also been brought to the fore by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, credited by Ateljevic as the thinker who first coined the term in her essay *La sonrisa de Saturno: Hacia una teoría transmoderna* (1989). Rodríguez Magda regards the current paradigm shift as the result of a dialectical process wherein Transmodernity would represent the synthetic element in a purported Hegelian triad formed by Modernity (thesis) and Postmodernity (antithesis) (Ateljevic 203). According to Rodríguez Magda, Modernity is by definition "anchored in the possibility and legitimacy of global discourse," a discourse that was put overtly into question by postmodernism and its critique of grand narratives (2018, n.p.). Transmodernity would thus represent a watershed insofar as it facilitates "a new Grand Narrative, i.e., Globalization." For Rodríguez Magda, "our mode of thinking" in transmodern times "should become […] 'transborder,' fluid, interconnected and unstable," thereby mirroring the "transnational" structures that nowadays vertebrate our global existence (n.p.).

In contrast to this rather Eurocentric interpretation,[1] Enrique Dussel's vision of Transmodernity departs from the existing relation between core (i.e., Western) and peripheral cultures.[2] For Dussel, Transmodernity is a response to Eurocentric discourses that emerges from the "omitted potentiality" and "exteriority" placed "beyond" Western Modernity; that is, in the margins occupied by so-called peripheral cultures. The mere existence of peripheral discourses counters "the metanarrative of modernity" (Alcoff 60), a distinctively Western phenomenon which, as Linda Alcoff has pointed out, Dussel does not see as being "characterized by a reflexive attitude toward one's own conventional beliefs and practices, à la the standard normative (and Eurocentric) account, but by the development of a constituting, differentiated, masterful ego, the I conquer ego of Descartes's individualist epistemic foundationalism" (62). Thus, as Alcoff further explains,

> for Dussel, modernity is essentially bound up with an egotistical assumption of the right of mastery and domination. […] [E]pistemic reflexivity in European modernity is less about putting one's own beliefs on firm grounds […] than about deflating all possible reasons to listen to the other, or to accept the authority of others, or to consider alternative approaches different than those I myself have produced. (62)[3]

Central to Dussel's outlook on Transmodernity is, then, the "affirmation" and "self-valorization" of those "negated or merely devalued" peripheral cultures, whose discourses have been purposefully left "outside of modernity" (Dussel, 2011, 49). In other words, Transmodernity represents the opportunity to articulate an alternative "meta-narrative that claims an even larger reach than the modern, with a more truly global and thus universal reference in place of the exclusivity of modernity to European-based and Eurocentric societies" (Alcoff 61). Thus, Alcoff summarises Dussel's transmodern project as an idea "designed in part to retell the story of Europe itself with an incorporation of the role of its Other in its formation […]. But it is also to retell the story of world history without a centered formation either in Europe or anywhere; no one becomes the permanent center or persistent periphery" (63).[4]

As Dussel explains, following the reception of postmodern philosophy in Latin America from the 1960s onwards, one of the many concerns being explored was precisely this erasure of permanent centres and persistent peripheries.[5] Postcolonial and subaltern studies, at first engaged in exposing the power relations existing between core and margin, started to shift towards a position that posited the inadequacy of the "*standard* vision of that universal history" for both non-Western and Western societies alike (36). Dussel speaks of the necessity to "reconstruct the concept of 'Modernity' from an 'exterior,' […] *global* perspective" in order to overcome the "clearly Eurocentric connotation" modernity still possesses in Europe and the United States (37). The "alterity" of peripheral cultures "with respect to European Modernity," after having been consistently excluded from the centre, makes them "not modern," and therefore not "post-modern either" (Dussel 42). They did not emerge as an *a posteriori* answer to Western imperialism; on the contrary, they coexisted along with —and were persistently overlooked by— Eurocentric Modernity, which renders them "simultaneously pre-modern, […] contemporary to Modernity, and soon, trans-modern" (Dussel 42).[6]

According to this perspective, Transmodernity would facilitate reassessing the relation between peripheral cultures, core cultures, and Eurocentric Modernity. In doing so, it might correct the imbalance hitherto existing between centre and margin by integrating all discourses into a meta-narrative that would foreground interconnectedness as a shared value. Nevertheless, some authors have underscored that a meta-narrative that privileges interconnectedness has already been established:

globalisation. Rodríguez Magda sees globalisation and Transmodernity as basically the same phenomenon,[7] whereas Glen D. Kuecker acknowledges the existence of both. Yet, he introduces a distinction: in his view, "neoliberal globalization is the ultimate pursuit of the modern world-system's rule-set," a "paradigm […] deep enough to serve as a meta-narrative for almost all ideologies" (156–7). Transmodernity, on the other hand, would represent "both a theoretical position within post-colonial critical theory and a lived reality," inasmuch as it seeks an "escape from the modern world-system through the transcendence of the Western epistemic," as well as what Kuecker labels as "a transmodern ontology" (156–7); that is to say, "a way of being human that transcends the modern world-system and generates its own ways of seeing and thinking" (163). One way in which Transmodernity can definitely overcome the meta-narrative of Eurocentric Modernity is by stressing "[d]iversity and border-crossing, […] in-betweeness, […] and hybridity" (165), thereby bringing forth the "importance of pluralistic difference and fluid, crossable borders as ways to breakdown the modern world-system's homogenized other" (164).

In a nutshell, the myriad viewpoints on Transmodernity can be roughly separated into two main groups, namely, those that privilege a Eurocentric perspective in its relation with Modernity, and those that aim to offer an alternative to Western Modernity by merging the peripheries with the centre. We have to wonder to what extent "keep[ing] the best of modernity," as Luyckx says, also entails keeping a Western-biased approach to phenomena such as hybridity or border-crossing.[8] This problematic persists when we try to approach literary works that put the focus on these issues. Some terms such as "transnational fiction" or "diasporic fiction" have been consistently used, hence stressing the in-between character of both these discourses and the authors producing them. However, the transformations undergone by diasporas and transnational fluxes throughout the last decades makes it hard to keep terminology unaltered. In what follows, I will examine to what extent diasporic communities have changed during the last few decades, paying special attention to the similarities and differences between the notion of diaspora both nowadays and thirty or forty years ago. Likewise, I will address the relation between transnationalism and diasporas in order to unravel the implications of using terms such as "transnational literature."

TRANSNATIONALISM THROUGH THE TRANSMODERN LENS

Jorge Duany defines "transnationalism" in rather neutral terms as the construction of dense social fields through the circulation of people, ideas, practices, money, goods, and information across nations. This circulation includes, but is not limited to, the physical movement of human bodies as well as other types of exchanges, which may or not be recurrent, such as travel, communication, and remittances (20–1). On the other hand, Arif Dirlik considers that:

> Transnationalism […] raises basic questions about the meaning of national belonging and identification, or cultural identity, when a population is dispersed broadly spatially, following different historical trajectories in different locations. It also assigns a formative power to encounters between people of different national and cultural backgrounds, who are transformed by the encounters in different ways. (296)

Both definitions foreground the spatial component of transnationalism insofar as it includes the physical movement of populations as well as material and immaterial elements. Duany focuses on the elements put into circulation, whereas Dirlik emphasises the questions transnational fluxes may raise in terms of "belonging and identification." Yet he also identifies a positive outcome due to the formative power of transnational encounters. As Fluck notes, these encounters "beyond national borders" might allow us "to arrive at fascinating new aesthetic objects that have emerged out of the contact of cultures" (369). These arguments seem to be in consonance with the distinctive transborder, fluid mode of thinking we can find in Transmodernity; it is not difficult to envision these "fascinating new aesthetic objects" as products of the current paradigm shift. Nevertheless, there is not just one possible type of transnational approach to literature from the American studies viewpoint, but rather multiple possibilities with different scope and goals. As Fluck argues, there are "several different versions" of transnationalism, and each of them envisions "different rewards in doing so" (366).

In Fluck's own words,

> the word transnationalism [in the context of American studies] is basically a code word for an America reinvigorated by an aesthetic plenitude made possible by cultural flow and exchange. Transnationalism here refers to an extension of the

> promises of diversity beyond national borders to arrive at fascinating new aesthetic objects that have emerged out of the contact of cultures. (369).

These transnational narratives are often "built on a basic dichotomy between identity formation in the nation-state, which is always associated with a stable, monolithic identity, and identity formation in a transnational world which promises to unsettle stable identities as a necessary precondition for regaining agency" (371). For Fluck, the problem with "aesthetic transnationalism" is that it is "not just innocently aiming at a cosmopolitan broadening of interpretive horizons." On the contrary, it "also pursues the goal of reconceptualizing America," and is ultimately a vehicle for "imply[ing] theories for and about America" (367) that echo the clear-cut division between centre (here, US discourses) and peripheries (external non-US influences) that were subject to Dussel's criticism. In Fluck's view, even though "transnational American studies want to provide conceptual tools" for unsettling stable and unified national identities, this desire for flexibility regarding the creation of new subjectivities "can also be seen, not as subversion of the political system but, on the contrary, as adaptation to a neoliberal logic in which movements of peoples and ideas are now the instruments of a new order of global capital" (368–9). Fluck concludes that

> The forms of transnationalism that are currently dominant in American studies are not a new beginning, then. On the contrary, the main project remains that of a struggle against interpellation by the U.S.-American nation-state in order to construct new identities. In most of the cases presented here, *transnational American studies have merely extended long-dominant paradigms beyond borders, and by doing so, they have created the false impression, perhaps also to their practitioners, that they are doing something new and potentially revolutionary*. (379–80; emphasis added)

This argument, I believe, is the reason why we should be careful in our use of transnational approaches to in-between fiction such as Latino/a fiction.[9] I am not trying to suggest that we should stop using these terms altogether, but I believe that they could be reframed and contextualised through the lens of Transmodernity. In doing so, we would be putting the emphasis on the potentialities of transnational fiction to become a bridge between Western and non-Western discourses. The hitherto clear-cut distinction between the two can be only overcome by merging both into a third type of discourse,

one that comes neither from the centre nor the peripheries, and is elaborated beyond national borders.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to consider some of the definitions and features of transnational Latino/a literature and diasporic communities while trying to bring forth the contact points they may share with Transmodernity. I will now review some of the arguments that sustain the identification of Latino/a literature as transnational literature. In addition, I will deal with the manner wherein diasporas have been affected by transnational flows, and try to interpret these factors from a transmodern angle.

In her overview of transnational Latino/a fiction, Juanita Heredia speaks of how this category broadened from referring to the writings of Chicano/a and Puerto Rican authors in the US in the 1960s and 1970s towards including "a wider array of authors from virtually all of the Latin American diasporas" nowadays, with greater representation of authors "of Central American and South American backgrounds" (169). In this sense, Heredia notes, Latino/a literature "do[es] not espouse one national dimension" (167), since it "encompasses various geographies and temporalities that reach beyond the Americas to spaces such as Africa, Asia, and Europe" (169). In doing so, Latino/a fiction breaks "national boundaries" as it "places its authors within the larger scope of world literature" (169). Likewise, Theresa Delgadillo considers that most Latino/a narratives are articulated around "transnational interests," namely, issues of migration, border crossing, navigating between more than one identity or affiliation, and so on (601).

The dissolution of national boundaries echoes the blurring of centre and periphery that Dussel, Rodríguez Magda and Luyckx see as a main feature of Transmodernity. It might seem that the boundaries being crossed in this case are those between North and South.[10] Heredia speaks of an expansion of the Latino/a canon "in a hemispheric context" (168). So does Delgadillo, who describes contemporary Latino/a literature as "representing a wider spectrum of Latinidad" (602). Moreover, the range of authors and nationalities included in this Latinidad "evinces even greater engagement with hemispheric over exclusively US realities" (602).[11] However, in some cases transnational Latino/a fiction is equally tied to "US realities" due to the coexisting connections between Latino/a diasporic communities, their native countries and the US.

Latino/a communities have consistently settled throughout the US in the last decades, experiencing a great transformation in the process. Due to the fuzziness of an all-comprising definition of diaspora,[12] in *Blurred Borders* (2011) Jorge Duany chooses to highlight some aspects that are still relevant to diasporic communities nowadays. He states that, generally speaking, diasporic identities "cannot be contained within a single nation-state, nor can their practices and discourses be completely understood from a well-bounded political, territorial, or linguistic perspective" (Duany 17). Likewise, he foregrounds the sustaining of "strong social, economic, cultural, political, and emotional bonds" between diasporic communities and their countries of origin as a defining feature (17). However, it is worth mentioning that the progressive expansion of transnational networks has substantially influenced the formulation and maintenance of "classic" diasporic interconnection. For Juan Flores, one of the defining features of the "new diasporas" currently emerging in the age of globalization has to do precisely with "the intensity and reciprocity of the ties between emigrant or exiled populations and their countries of origin" nowadays (21); following Van Hear's definition, he privileges the term "transnational community" above "diaspora" in order to fully apprehend all the nuances and connotations these changes imply (21).

The main difference between "classical diasporas" and "new diasporas" originates in the increasing degree of mobility attained by their members. Higher mobility leads to different configurations of both diasporic experiences and identity, since the once unidirectional movement is nowadays increasingly bi- or multi-directional. Therefore, phenomena such as hybridity or border-crossing acquire new layers of meaning, insofar as transnational fluxes not only include diaspora members moving from the peripheries to the centre, but also those travelling back from the centre to the peripheries. In *Diaspora Strikes Back* (2008), Flores uses the term "reasporican" to pinpoint the experience of these

> returning emigrant nationals ("remigrants") of many countries [who] bring cultural ideas and values acquired in diaspora settings to bear on their native lands or that of their forebears, often with boldly innovative and unsettling effect. This often unwitting and unintended cultural challenge […] has a particular edge because it is lodged not by "foreigners" imposing their ways in accord with reigning systems of international power, but by "one's own," as it were […]. They are outsiders and "others" whose presence all too often spurs resentment, ridicule and fear, and even

> disdain and social discrimination with clear racial and class undertones. Yet at the same time, their presence also elicits fascination, engagement, and change. (4–5)

In his analysis, Flores sees the impact of reasporicans in their countries of origin as an opportunity for "radical re-charting of anti-imperialist cultural politics in the hemisphere" (49). As he further states:

> In the traditional view, the national territory is thought of as the fount of cultural perspectives that are alternative and oppositional to hegemonic metropolitan cultures of domination, and that resistance then informs the cultural and political agenda of the nation's diaspora within the metropolis. *It is now becoming evident that this transnational flow may also travel in the opposite direction and that the colonial diaspora itself may well generate a culture of resistance to national elite domination and complicity*. Cultural remittances—eminently transnational as a consequence of circular migration and the ubiquity of contemporary communications technology—implode in the national territory as something foreign, and yet in their local relevance not so foreign after all. (Flores 49; emphasis added)

The "reasporican" dimension of diasporas nowadays is also noted by Heredia in her overview of Latino/a literature in the US. She perceives that a "shift" has taken place in Latino/a fiction, now more concerned with capturing "transnational migrations" that do not only contemplate "traveling to the United States as a final destination," but are more concerned with what she calls "voyages of return" (167). These narratives, mostly published "in the first decade of the twenty-first century," intend to capture "a return to Latin America through physical journeys, memories, or maintaining cultural and social practices" (167). These texts explore the possibilities of inhabiting liminal spaces and adopting fluid identities, in contrast to earlier Latino/a narratives that focused on the arrival and adaptation to the host US culture.[13]

It is fundamental to bear in mind in this respect that the exchanges between native and host culture within Latino/a diasporic communities are influenced by the fact that, in this case, native culture also implies peripheral culture, whereas host culture implies core culture. Transnationalism from a peripheral perspective has the potential to subvert "anti-imperialist cultural politics in the hemisphere," to use Juan Flores' words (49); the beyond-the-national component is precisely what introduces the possibility of

reassessing those practices sustained by hegemonic power. Going back and forth across borders constructs a "global relationality among elements" and helps prevent them from becoming "irreducibly local" (Alcoff 65). This version of transnationalism aligned with diasporic communities is best understood within the meta-narrative of Transmodernity:

> The transmodern metanarrative suggests a recipe for moving forward not through universalist procedures justified via a transcendental arguments [*sic*] outside of cultural or historical specificity, but via an analysis of how and where cultural dialogues can occur most productively given the way in which the current global discursive regimes have been affected by colonialism. Radical critiques respond […] from another place or location, positioned as the exterior to those designated universal cultures of European Modernity. […] It is from here that new paths for future development and dialogue will emerge toward "pluriversality as a universal project." (Walter Mignolo qtd. in Alcoff 65–6)

The recuperation of peripheral discourses in Latino/a "voyages of return" narratives, as well as their integration alongside other elements taken from the host culture, can be counted among the defining traits of transnational Latino/a fiction. In terms of identity and affiliation, we must take into consideration that some of these authors are second- or third-generation migrants and, therefore, might feel more compelled to see themselves as US citizens. Others, however, identify with their Latino/a roots, and, sometimes, with their African or Asian ancestry as well. Their works tend to explore the contradictions and self-questioning triggered by this permanent state of in-betweenness. It is from such an outer position that they are able to critically engage with centre and periphery alike, trying to deconstruct both discourses and then reassembling them together.

However, a question remains to be answered: Can we isolate the "transmodern traits" in these writings? Are there particular elements that can be said to be transmodern currently being employed in transnational Latino/a fiction or other in-between literatures? Thus far, my review of the shared aspects of transnational literature and Transmodernity has focused on rather theoretical questions. I will now turn to analyse particular mechanisms that can be regarded, in my opinion, as potential features for a definition of transmodern literature. In the following section I will review some of the literature on Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) in order to shed some light on the elements currently at work in Latino/a fiction, particularly

linguistic features, as well as textual and paratextual elements. I will argue that Diaz's novel represents a type of transmodern text that is truly hybrid insofar as it combines discourses from the peripheries and the centre which result in a completely different third discourse that is neither postcolonial nor postmodern but transmodern.

JUNOT DIAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO* AS TRANSMODERN LITERATURE

Published in 2007, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* follows three generations of the Cabral-De León family as their members try to come to terms with the turbulent family past. The main plot follows Oscar, a nerdy Dominican American boy whose quest for love ultimately leads him from New Jersey to Santo Domingo, where he will meet a tragic fate. Oscar's journey is inevitably marked by the traumatic experiences of his mother and grandfather under the dictatorial regime of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. The narration jumps back and forth in time, unravelling the stories of Oscar's mother, Beli (Hypatia Belicia) and her father, Abelard Cabral, through detailed flashbacks which also alternate spatial locations, moving from the United States to the Dominican Republic and back. These three intercalated plotlines form what Jennifer Harford Vargas has described as "a transgenerational cycle of violence" (9). The voice behind these assembled stories is that of Yunior, Oscar's roommate in college, who turns into a "writer-historian" (Hanna 500) as he researches Oscar's family past. Yunior is profoundly aware of the challenge that gathering the scattered pieces implies, and constantly struggles to fill in the blanks and gaps to be found in the official family history.

I aim to discuss some of the formal mechanisms employed by Junot Diaz in this novel which, in my view, are used to push the narrative beyond the limits set by genres, language and the text itself. I believe these formal mechanisms are used to enhance the themes and storylines that vertebrate the novel while taking it to a completely new level. It is perhaps too far-fetched to affirm that these formal aspects *are* transmodern; rather, I suggest that it is the combination of form and content that creates a transmodern fictional work. Notions that have been marked as transmodern features, such as interconnectedness or hybridity, are here underscored through multiple textual and paratextual resources that I will now review. Mainly, I intend to focus on the

palimpsestic quality of the novel, presented as a rewriting of official, hegemonic discourse and concerned with restoring the voices silenced under Trujillo's dictatorial regime.

In the introduction, we are first presented with the two concepts around which the novel develops: "fukú" and "zafa." Fukú, or "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Diaz 1) is said to either have been brought from Africa "carried in the screams of the enslaved," or unleashed by the "arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola" (1). Far from being "ancient history" (1), it has been a constant throughout Dominican history, especially during Trujillo's dictatorship. Any ill-fated event can be regarded as a manifestation of fukú; even the creation of the Dominican diaspora is said to be the consequence of "Trujillo's payback to the pueblo that betrayed him" (6). Moreover, fukú is not exclusively Dominican: "The Puertorocks [Puerto Ricans] want to talk about fufus, and the Haitians have some shit just like it" (6). Fukú spreads throughout the Caribbean and feeds upon those nations that were subject to colonial domination. "*Fukú americanus*," we are told, "was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (1; emphasis in the original). Yunior, the narrator, tells us that "[e]verybody ins Santo Domingo has a fukú story" and that despite its seemingly superstitious nature, its influence is unstoppable because "no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you" (5–6). Fukú functions "as a metaphor for the perpetuation of colonial power structures" (Mahler 119), and is used to convey the sensation of cyclical, inescapable violence.[14] It represents the most visible side of colonialism and imperialist policies in the Caribbean, including, of course, neo-colonialism under the sign of the United States' foreign policies (see Diaz 3–6; Mahler 121). The greatest expression of fukú in the Dominican Republic in contemporary times is also an example of the "damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships" (Diaz 3n1); in this case, Trujillo's regime.

Jennifer Harford Vargas sees fukú as the "symbolic chronotope for the time-space of domination that is continually regenerating and transforming" (9). As such, fukú would act as a mechanism with the potential to create a "trans-American community through an act of imagined identification across forms of domination, spaces of (neo)colonial violence, and histories of subalternization" (10). This "fukú foundational fiction" (10) serves to foreground the common history of Latin American peripheries in an inherently transnational manner. Starting in 1492, fukú summarises the

colonisation and domination of native Caribbean cultures and their subsequent displacement to peripheral positions provoked by European —and later US— colonialism interference, "from colonialism through the Trujillato to the current era of neoliberalism, employing the persistent presence of the fukú to suggest that the Dominican Republic has never truly been liberated from the tyranny of colonial rule" (Mahler 121). Using Enrique Dussel's terminology, fukú may be said to stand for the history of domination endured by Latin America resulting from the consolidation of Western Modernity. It is no wonder, then, that zafa, the only thing that can put a stop to fukú, comes from folk culture, that is to say, from a position radically alien to Modernity. Articulated as a resistance discourse, zafa can be seen as the expression of the South-South dialogue that Enrique Dussel speaks of. Moreover, structuring the story around the poles of fukú and zafa suggests that "understanding Oscar's life requires a transgenerational family story and a trans-American history, just as understanding Trujillo's reign requires remembering the colonial past and recognizing contemporary dictatorial relations" (Harford Vargas 15). The local mirrors the national and even the transnational, given that fukú is common to all Caribbean countries, and possibly to all Latin-American countries as well —even though this is not explicitly mentioned in the novel.

Yunior explains that fukú's ominous influence can be counterbalanced with zafa, a word used to "prevent disaster from coiling around you" (Diaz 7). The story of Oscar and his family is presented as a "fukú story," whereas the act of writing as well as the resulting book are "zafa," the narrator's "very own counterspell" (7). This zafa story is an alternative version of the official history of the "U.S.-backed dictatorship" exerted by Trujillo and, in a broader sense, "a transamerican counter-dictatorial act" (Harford Vargas 10). In short, zafa rewrites fukú. Unfortunately, it cannot wholly mend the damage caused by the dictatorship. Even though Yunior seeks to uncover the stories erased by the regime, he often acknowledges his inability to fill in the void left by some unutterable trauma or some experience forever lost, therefore leaving gaps and blanks scattered throughout the text. Yunior struggles to reconstruct and "uncover both the story of the family and the history of the nation" (Hanna 498) which are connected precisely through the common denominator of violence and trauma. As Monica Hanna notes, Yunior's sources "are fragmentary at best" due to the fact that "so much of the

history he wishes to recover has been violently suppressed and shrouded in silence" (498).

As Hanna suggests, "while Trujillan history is only concerned with the powerful, Yunior's history includes the stories of those who resist despite their lack of power" (504). In this sense, we can consider the zafa story Yunior writes to be a palimpsest. Writing the book is an act of struggling and resilience as he means to incorporate the voices left out of the hegemonic discourse. Hanna also mentions that Yunior's narration "is meant to act as a direct counterpoint to the national history presented by the regime" by presenting, first of all, "a narrative voice that diverges from that of the Trujillan model […] a univocal voice of nationalistic rhetoric" (504). According to Hanna, "[i]t is this internalization of the Trujillan historiography that Yunior battles throughout the text by positing an alternative based on memory and inclusion" (504). His alternative historiography is purposefully unpolished, to the extent that he overtly recognizes his limitations and contradictions, and even recognises that he made up some parts of the story in order to fill in the gaps.

But perhaps the ultimate goal of Yunior's rewriting is not to offer the complete story as it happened, but rather, as Jennifer Harford Vargas suggests, to "interrogate dictatorial power in its various sociohistorical manifestations" through the use of diverse "narrative techniques and formal structures," namely, "oral sources, footnotes, and silences" (10) that are introduced "to mimic the dissemination and repression of information under dictatorship and dictate a story against dictatorship without being dictatorial" (18). In addition, Yunior's assembling of these scattered, silenced stories, as well as his attempts to fill in the gaps, serves to emphasize "the constructed nature" of his story and any story alike, hence compelling readers "to examine the power structures behind the act of telling" (Hanna 501).

It is important to notice that Yunior is able to articulate this counter-discourse of resistance precisely because he occupies the liminal space between "two cultures (their own [Dominican] culture and Modern culture [represented by US culture])," as Dussel puts it (2002, 47). However, in this case there is a radical differentiation between Yunior's "own culture" and "Modern culture" that needs clarification. Yunior is part of the Dominican-American diaspora, and although his focus throughout the novel is clearly put on Dominican history and identity, he nonetheless borrows from

traditionally Latin-American genres such as magical realism as much as he does from US popular culture, hence conveying the impression that he does not privilege one over the other.[15] By incorporating elements taken from "superhero comics, magical realism, and noir, […] as well as conventional historical narration" (Hanna 499–500), *Oscar Wao* simultaneously "engages with Caribbean literary and historical discourses, with a heavy emphasis on Afro-Caribbean literary tradition, while also adopting narrative structures and references particular to US literature and popular culture" (499).

It is precisely from such a position that the meta-narrative of Transmodernity can be successfully articulated. Yunior's zafa story represents the attempt to create a critical alternative to the official, Eurocentric discourse from a perspective that has incorporated Western and non-Western elements alike, hence creating a "pastiche," as Hanna states (500). Likewise, Joy Sanchez-Taylor sees this "hybrid-genre text" as an attempt "to move away from static representations of Dominican history towards not-yet-realized depictions of Dominican and Dominican American cultures" (94); the incorporation of science fiction and fantasy elements into the novel "allows [Diaz] to comment on current and future possibilities" for these cultures (95). The exploration of "current and future possibilities" through the hybridisation of genres and forms is inherently transmodern. Likewise, the alternative discourse to hegemonic Eurocentrism that merges non-Western and Western elements is transmodern.

The constant mixture of genres, languages and registers, as well as the numerous references left unexplained, pose a challenge to readers approaching *Oscar Wao*. There are several levels of interpretation that can be unlocked and whose reading depends on a number of factors, namely, the amount of prior information possessed by readers on Dominican history or Western science fiction, fantasy and comic books, but also linguistic knowledge. In the novel, Yunior constantly draws from science-fiction and fantasy, both significantly "Western" genres, in order to convey those "parts of the Dominican experience [that] cannot be expressed" (Sanchez-Taylor 98).[16] Namely, any reader who is familiar with the *Lord of the Rings* fictional universe will easily form a mental image of Trujillo after he has been compared to Sauron, regardless of his or her prior knowledge of Dominican history. From this perspective, Yunior might as well be reasporican rather than diasporican, insofar as he is taking "cultural ideas and values acquired in diaspora settings" and using them to convey otherwise unutterable Dominican experiences with an "unsettling effect" (Flores 4).

Sean O'Brien also comments on the unexplained references in the novel and states that: "*Oscar Wao* gives readers just enough context to foreground the challenge of incorporating such information into the reading process" (76). He concludes that

> *Oscar Wao*'s readers, forced to make decisions about how to deal with frequent allusions to traditions and contexts that do not purport to be universal or even widely shared, find themselves in […] a world that contemporary readers ignore at their own risk, as global fiction in English increasingly draws on contexts beyond the Western tradition. (76–7)

By using elements whose main function is to unsettle the readership and push them beyond their comfort zone,[17] Yunior is challenging them to gather information on their own. Moreover, his constant contradictions and rectifications also create the impression that he cannot be fully trusted, even if his intentions are good. The perception of his narrative as misleading or purposefully wrong seeks to activate readership collaboration. I believe this posture regarding the reader is indicative of a certain transmodern attitude. Due to the immediate availability of any piece of data online, we can now approach the reading process differently. We can choose to complete the information we are given if we do not fully understand it; we can gather extra information if we wish to, and do so as we go on reading. Novels such as *Oscar Wao* seek to unsettle the reader (especially the Western, English speaking reader) by shifting the frame of reference we are used to, but by adopting this strategy of defamiliarisation, as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky called it (see Crawford 209), they are trying to trigger a positive reaction, countering the deadening effect of habit and convention and thereby deautomatising perception. Depending on our will to engage in this way of reading, we might discover new layers of meaning.

As my analysis has attempted to show, the application of a transmodern frame of reference to transborder, hybrid fictions such as Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao* may enrich the manner wherein we approach contemporary literature, especially in those cases where literary manifestations escape the traditional classification according to national literatures. It seems clear that, given the proliferation of terms such as "transnational literature" or "global literature," the national paradigm established as the sole frame of reference might be on the brink of becoming obsolete. However, as I have argued above, a transnational approach means nothing if we do not first problematise the meta-narrative that sustains it.

Even if we attain higher levels of interconnectedness due to the proliferation of transnational networks, true interconnectedness and solidarity will never be attained lest we start articulating these exchanges from a position beyond our Eurocentric comfort zone. It is in this sense that Transmodernity provides an opportunity to rethink our position in a global scenario where new challenges constantly emerge and previous meta-narratives no longer account for the transformations currently taking place. A truly global consciousness will only be possible if we deconstruct our position of privilege and reconstruct our discourse without establishing either a permanent centre or a permanent periphery, as Enrique Dussel envisions.

Notes

[1] This distinction is introduced by Ateljevic at the beginning of her review, as she distinguishes between the opinions of "Europeans/Americans" and "postcolonial and subaltern writers." The distinction is drawn again when discussing the differences between Luyckx's and Dussel's viewpoints (201; 204). Furthermore, in his definition of Transmodernity, Luyckx explicitly speaks of "the West" being "in a process of transition from modernity towards what we called transmodernity," thereby limiting the experience of Transmodernity to some parts of the globe. While discussing this issue he later on explicitly mentions "the positive reaction of the non-Western participants," and comments on the fact that "[non-Western participants] perceived [this] as a Western opening to criticism of modernity, as an entrance door to an unexpected new kind of dialogue with us" (972).

[2] Dussel speaks of peripheral discourses existing in "Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe." This particular definition comprises any non-European culture displaced and confronted by "an 'imperial' culture […] which originated with the invasion of América (*sic*) in 1492" (2011, 33).

[3] The ideas advocated by Dussel regarding Modernity have little to do with Rodríguez Magda's understanding of the same concept. These differences are crucial insofar as the genealogy of the concept changes substantially. For instance, Magda's view on Transmodernity as the result of a dialectical process is radically incompatible with Dussel's views. For further reading, see Alcoff.

[4] It is worth noting that the blurring of center and margins is also signaled by Rodríguez Magda as one of the distinguishing aspects of Transmodernity: "the globalized society no longer contents itself with the dichotomy of the center and its margins, but instead thrives on a network of interconnected megalopoles indicative at any rate of a ubiquitous transborder space" (2008, 15).

[5] For a comprehensive account of the transformation undergone in postcolonial Latin American thought from the 1970s onwards, see Enrique Dussel's *Hacia una filosofía política crítica* (2002), especially chapter XXI, "La filosofía de la liberación, los *subaltern studies* y el pensamiento poscolonial norteamericano" (435–52).

[6] Dussel identifies "post-modernity" as a distinctively Western phenomenon which "indicates that there is a process that emerges 'from within' modernity and reveals a state of crisis within globalization" (2002, 223).

[7] In particular, she states that "[g]lobalization is the all-embracing Total, the chaotic and dynamic fulfillment of the dialectical imperative, the new paradigm that I have proposed to refer to as Transmodernity" (2008, 17).

[8] For a critique of the Western epistemological framework adopted by postcolonial Latin American thought, see Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel.

[9] The characterization of Latino/a fiction as in-between fiction stems from Latinos/as plural identity, caught between their Latin American background and their US upbringing (for those who were born in the US) or acculturation (for those who immigrated to the US). In the groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of *los intersticios*, or the spaces between the different worlds to which Latinas are relegated as a result of their alienation from both the mother culture and the dominant culture, i.e. US culture (20). Fatima Mujčinović observes in her analysis of Anzaldúa's

argument that "[t]he confusion of not knowing in which culture one will find acceptance and belonging is intensified with the awareness of the tension between different cultural orders" (28). Therefore, in addition to the attempts to juggle multiple identities, Latino/a in-betweenness often embraces a critical perspective, insofar as it takes advantage of this awareness in order to subvert cultural hierarchies. As Mujčinović further elaborates, in-betweenness can be felt as "a location of entrapment, confinement, and isolation," but at the same time it also "carries a potential for transformation as it destabilizes the singularity and autonomy of cultural authority and subsequently provides alternative forms of existence" (30). It is precisely this potential for transformation that aligns US Latino/a experience with Dussel's transmodern project.

[10] Let us bear in mind that Enrique Dussel sees Transmodernity as a meta-narrative with the potential to create a North-South dialogue: "A future trans-modern culture […] will have a rich pluriversity and would be the fruit of an authentic intercultural dialogue […]. [A]n intercultural dialogue must be also transversal, but at the same time it needs to set out from a place-other than a mere dialogue between the learned experts of the academic or institutionally-dominant worlds. It must be also a multicultural dialogue that does not presuppose the illusion of a non-existent symmetry between cultures." (2011, 43)

[11] In this "Latinidad" Delgadillo includes "the other Latinos/as"; that is, Latin-American migrants —or their descendants— other than Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban and Dominican, who settled in the US yet were not as numerous there as the aforementioned nationalities. Delgadillo explicitly mentions Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, and Colombian Americans, among others (602). Establishing "Latinidad" with an ample transnational focus that also incorporates other spaces beyond Latin America can help promoting the South-South dialogue needed before a North-South dialogue might take place: "It is more than anything a dialogue between the 'critics of the periphery,' it must be an intercultural South-South dialogue before can (*sic*) become a South-North dialogue." (Dussel 2011, 48)

[12] Different definitions of diaspora have been given by Clifford (1994), Safran (1991) and Flores (2008), to name but a few representative names.

[13] Here I am referring to trends rather than strict periodisation. Generally speaking, there are narratives that explore the process of adapting to the host culture, whereas others tend to focus on the attempts to reconnect with the native culture. Namely, Julia Álvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) would be representative of the former, whereas Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) would be representative of the latter —although they were published only a year apart from each other. Nevertheless, I think that the second trend is perhaps more ubiquitous nowadays, precisely due to the influence of transnational fluxes. In the words of Heredia, nowadays "[t]ransnational Latino/a narratives differentiate from previous decades because they provide more cultural, social, and historical contexts that explain the reasons for departure from the heritage/homeland. To understand US Latino/a literature in the twenty-first century, one must pay attention to multiple geographies and histories within the narratives, elements that often reveal the circumstances under which the protagonist and the family had to migrate across nations and continents." (169)

[14] For the analysis of the idea that Yunior's story is cyclical and the connections between cyclical time and magical realism in *Oscar Wao*, see Hanna.

[15] We are never told how Yunior feels about his "American identity," whereas we do hear a lot about his relation with the Dominican Republic and the attempts of all characters to come to terms with their Dominican roots. However, it is true that all American-born characters in *Oscar Wao* (that is, Yunior, Oscar and Lola, Oscar's sister and Yunior's once girlfriend) have been raised in the United States surrounded by Western pop-culture references, and seem comfortable with this dual cultural background. Of course, being at ease with American cultural references does not entail that Yunior cannot maintain a critical stance regarding hegemonic powers and its ever-lasting influence in the Caribbean.

[16] For a detailed account of the influence of science fiction and fantasy genres in *Oscar Wao*, see Sanchez-Taylor.

[17] In this regard, the case of Spanglish in *Oscar Wao* is another source of trouble. There are several authors who have analysed in detail the linguistic hybridity of the novel. See Casielles-Suárez and Dumitrescu.

Works Cited

Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Enrique Dussel's Transmodernism." *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1.3 (2012): 60–68. Accessed on 17/06/2018 at: escholarship.org/uc/item/58k9k17t/. Web.

Álvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004 [1991].

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.

Ateljevic, Irena. "Visions of Transmodernity: A New Renaissance of our Human History?" *Integral Review* 9.2 (2013): 200–219. Accessed on 02/06/2018 at: www.integral-review.org/issues/vol_9_no_2_ateljevic_visions_of_ transmodernity.pdf/. Web.

Casielles-Suárez, Eugenia. "Radical Code-switching in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 90.4 (2013): 475–87. Accessed on 28/11/2018 at: doi:10.3828/bhs.2013.30. Web.

Castro-Gómez, Santiago. "Latinoamericanismo, Modernidad, Globalización. Prolegómenos a una crítica poscolonial de la razón." *Teorías sin disciplina. Latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate*. Ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Eduardo Mendieta. México: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 1998. 169–206. Print.

Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (August 1994): 302–338. Accessed on 29/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/656365. Web.

Crawford, Lawrence. "Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization." *Comparative Literature* 36 (1984): 209–19. Print.

Delgadillo, Theresa. "The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century." *American Literary History* 23.3 (Fall 2011): 600–624. Accessed on 11/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/41237457/. Web.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.

Dirlik, Arif. "American Studies in the Time of Empire." *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 2.3 (2004): 287–302. Accessed on 10/09/2018 at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1477570004046771/. Web.

Duany, Jorge. *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*. Chapel Hill, NC: The U of North Carolina P, 2011. Print.

Dumitrescu, Domnita. "Dude was figureando hard: El cambio y la fusión de códigos en la obra de Junot Díaz." *Perspectives in the Study of Spanish Language Variation. Papers in Honor of Carmen Silva-Corvalán*. Ed. Andrés Enrique-Arias et al. Santiago de Compostela: Servizo de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico Campus Vida, 2014. 397–432. Accessed on 22/11/2018 at: dx.doi.org/10.15304/va.2014.701. Web.

Dussel, Enrique. *Hacia una filosofía política crítica*. Bilbao: Desclée De Brouwer, 2001.

——. "World-System and Transmodernity." *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.2, (2002): 221–44. Print.

——. "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation." *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1 (2011): 28–59. Print.

Flores, Juan. *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Fluck, Winfried. "A New Beginning? Transnationalisms." *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011): 365–84. Accessed on 09/10/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/41328972/. Web.

García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

Grosfoguel, Ramón. "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality." *Transmodernity* 1.1 (2011): 1–36. Accessed on 04/03/2019 at: dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=3998080. Web.

Hanna, Monica. "'Reassembling the Fragments.' Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *Callalloo* 33.2 (2010): 498–520. Accessed on 11/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/40732888/. Web.

Harford Vargas, Jennifer. "Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *MELUS* 39.3 (Fall 2014): 8–30. Accessed on 11/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/24569858/. Web.

Heredia, Juanita. "Transnational US Latino/a Literature: From the 1960s to the Twenty-First Century." *Hispania* 100.5 (2017): 167–72. Accessed on 11/09/2018 at: www.muse.jhu.edu/article/688450/. Web.

Kuecker, Glen D. "From the Alienation of Neoliberal Globalization to the Transmodern Ways of Being: Epistemic Change and the Collapse of the Modern World-System." *Journal of Globalization Studies* 5.1 (May 2014): 154–70. Print.

Luyckx, Marc. "The Transmodern Hypothesis: Towards a Dialogue of Cultures." *FUTURES* 31.9–10 (1999): 971–82. Print.

Mahler, Anne Garland. "The Writer as Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 19.2 (2010): 119–40. Accessed on 24/09/2018 at: doi: 10.1080/13569325.2010.494928. Web.

Mujčinović, Fatima. *Postmodern Cross-Culturalism and Politicization in U.S. Latina Literature. From Ana Castillo to Julia Álvarez*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

O'Brien, Sean P. "Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern*

Language Association 45.1 (Spring 2012): 75–94. Accessed on 22/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/ 43150831. Web.

Rodríguez Magda, Rosa María. *La sonrisa de Saturno: Hacia una teoría transmoderna*. Barcelona: Anthropos, 1989. Print.

——. *Transmodernidad*. Barcelona: Anthropos, 2004. Print.

——. "Globalization as Transmodern Totality." *Transmodernity* 27 December 2008. Accessed on 02/06/2018 at: http://transmodern-theory.blogspot.com/ 2008/12/globalization-as-transmodern-totality.html/. Web.

Sanchez-Taylor, Joy. "'I Was a Ghetto Nerd Supreme': Science Fiction, Fantasy and Latina/o Futurity in Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 25.1 (2014): 93–106. Accessed on 25/09/2018 at: www.jstor.org/stable/24353118/. Web.

Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.1 (Spring 1991): 83–99. Accessed on 29/09/2018 at: doi:10.1353/dsp.1991.0004. Web.