"Reassembling the Fragments": Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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“REASSEMBLING THE FRAGMENTS”
Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

by Monica Hanna

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. . . . Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.  
—Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”

In “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Derek Walcott suggests that Caribbean art “reassembles the fragments” and “restor[es] the shattered histories” of the islands. These images of fragmentation, reassembly, and restoration are particularly useful in describing the literary and historical reconstructions of Dominican history offered by Junot Díaz’s 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel’s title suggests the narrative goal of chronicling the life of Oscar “Wao” (the narrator’s nickname for the novel’s hero, Oscar de León), an overweight Dominican “ghetto nerd” from New Jersey. Yet the task of telling his story soon grows to implicate recounting the experiences of Oscar’s family (including his sister, Lola, his mother, Belicia, and his grandfather, Abelard) as well as the history of the Dominican Republic as it relates to their lives, from the United States-backed occupation to Trujillo’s dictatorship to the massive diaspora following Trujillo’s ascension. The wide historical scope of the novel is evident from the outset. The preface begins with references to the first encounters between Europeans, Tainos, and Africans in the “New World.” The chapters that follow explore the lives of three generations of the Cabral-de León family, non-linearly covering the 1940s through the 1990s. This story is filtered by Yunior, Oscar’s sometime friend and our mysterious narrator, whose identity and involvement in the story are only slowly revealed and whose name is not even mentioned until almost two hundred pages into the book. Throughout the narration, Yunior self-consciously struggles and experiments with how best to accomplish his task because in the process of his research, as he attempts to uncover both the story of the family and the history of the nation, he is continually confronted with silences, gaps, and “páginas en blanco” left by the Trujillo regime. Yunior often explicitly rejects the possibility of recovering an original, whole story because so much of the history he wishes to recover has been violently suppressed and shrouded in silence. The sources to which he has recourse are fragmentary at best, and he asserts the need of his art and creativity to cohere those shards and give a new shape to the vase of Dominican diasporic art and history. The novel adopts a hybrid
narrative model which reflects its focus on diasporic characters (the matriarch, Belicia, is forced to leave the Dominican Republic and settles in New Jersey where her children are born and raised). *Oscar Wao* self-consciously 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 United States literature and popular culture in a language that crackles with vibrancy. The result is a form that incorporates superhero comics, magical realism, and noir, among other genres, as well as conventional historical narration and the use of multiple narrative perspectives.

The mixture of Caribbean and United States references is signaled in the two epigraphs of the novel. The first comes from the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby comic, *Fantastic Four*, which provides one of the narrative frames of the novel. The epigraph reads: “of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus??” This epigraph hints at the role of comics, which figure prominently in the novel. It also points to the relevance of the comic genre to the story, as it questions the element of “brief, nameless lives” in relationship to Galactus, a god-like figure in *Fantastic Four* whose considerable power is alluded to in his name. The question of the “nameless lives” of figures traditionally not considered in histories of the nation and their relationship to figures of power is central to the novel. The epigraph has ominous overtones, suggesting a high stakes battle. This article will argue that there is indeed a high stakes battle at play in the narration of this novel over how to represent Dominican history.

The second epigraph comes from a very different literary source: the second stanza of Derek Walcott’s poem “The Schooner Flight.”

Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!
From that dog rotting down Wrightston Road
to when I was a dog on these streets;
if loving these islands must be my load,
out of corruption my soul takes wings,
But they had started to poison my soul
with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,
cookie, nigger, Syrian and French Creole,
so I leave it for them and their carnival—
I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road.
I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois for
any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
when these slums of empire was paradise.
I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.

The Walcott poem presents a speaker who sees himself as a representative figure of the nation, as his biography contains the elements of the nation’s entire history. Even his language is particular to this history. This epigraph’s tone is expansive, presenting an all-inclusive vision that embraces the disparate elements of Caribbean history.
The pairing of these two epigraphs is indicative. Díaz’s novel here creates connections between two apparently distinct sources—one from United States pop culture and one from contemporary Caribbean literary production. This alerts the reader to the fact that the story to follow will draw on quite different sources, creating a pastiche that attempts to capture the Caribbean diasporic experience. The two epigraphs also address the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective, with the Fantastic Four quote suggesting a natural antipathy between power and lived “ordinary” experiences while the Walcott poem suggests the intimate relationship between official history and the experiences of a nation’s citizens.

This article focuses on the narrative choices of Oscar Wao in relation to the way in which history is understood in the text. I argue that the novel strives for a “resistance history” which acts as an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres. By incorporating genres like magical realism and “nerd” genres that include comics and science fiction, Díaz develops a historiography that shifts the narrative structure as well as the subject of history, allowing for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant, elements. Yunior seeks to present Dominican history in this way in order to resist the conformity and univocality insisted upon by the national power structure best personified by the figure of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. This dictatorial version of history perhaps speaks most loudly through the silence it imposes on large swaths of the population in both public and private life. Yunior struggles with the silences that pervade both the history of Oscar de León’s family and that of the Dominican Republic, stories which are consistently intertwined in the text. Yunior adopts several narrative frames and examines the story from multiple perspectives. It is this very multiplicity that becomes the cornerstone of Yunior’s narrative and historiographic stance, allowing him to document and reconstruct a history that is otherwise unrecoverable because of its official nullification.

One of the generic choices of the novel to which this article pays particular attention is the invocation of magical realism and its relevance to the representation of history attempted by the novel. Yunior becomes a writer-historian in the process of researching Oscar’s family, but the history that he tells is not one of linear progression like conventional representations of history. Rather, the history that he relates is cyclical. With echoes of Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad [One Hundred Years of Solitude], successive generations, each ignorant of the history of its ancestors, seem doomed to re-live the violence and evil wrought by the family’s curse. Each new generation seems inevitably to suffer the “solitude” that García Márquez explores, sharing the same pessimistic and perhaps even fatalistic perspective. Yet Yunior’s narrative of the lives of Oscar and his family necessarily departs from the traditional conception of magical realism because he tells it from the perspective of diaspora. Although Oscar seems to accept “old-school” ways of understanding the engine of history, Yunior remains skeptical. His retelling of what he initially calls a “fukú story” (i.e., a tragic story whose central catalyst is a fukú—curse—placed on the family during the Trujillato), combines “old-school” models for understanding history that are “bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo” along with alternative ways of understanding that history (7). Magical realism provides an important element of the story; indeed, the characters who are the most skeptical of the magical elements of their own histories are the ones who least grasp the trajectories of these histories. The dialectic
between skepticism and belief is clear in the narrator’s voice. However, unlike the McOndo backlash against magical realism, Yunior maintains the validity of this worldview which he identifies with Caribbean discourse, often incorporating a touch of humor into his use of magical realism.1 For example, at one point, when describing the fukú that he claims provides one way of understanding the tragedy that befalls Oscar, Yunior describes the history of the fukú itself. After a description that contains supernatural flourishes, Yunior steps outside of this narration and addresses the doubt that might arise in the reader’s mind. He proclaims, “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (5). It is interesting that this discussion that relates so closely to Latin American literary discussions about the appropriate way of depicting Latin American “reality” happens in a novel written in English and dealing with Latin@ protagonists.2

The coexistence of multiple narrative frames allows Yunior to arrive at a history that he sees as more truthful than the accounts that purport authoritative control over the past because of the latter’s omissions. Conventional histories are unable to explain Oscar’s story satisfactorily, as they are unable to reveal a full portrait of the Dominican nation. Yet Yunior maintains his freedom from the onus of telling the definitive, authoritative version of Oscar’s history and Dominican history. This freedom derives in part from the inaccessibility of so much of that history because of the purposeful lack of documentation. These silences become construed as a freedom that allows Yunior to fill in the gaps in a more creative way; he does quite a bit of traditional research, reading a variety of primary sources and conducting interviews, yet he still gives himself license to imaginatively recreate elements of the story that are otherwise inaccessible. At the same time, he includes the reader in this process of reconstruction; there is much that is explicitly left up to the reader’s interpretation. This is another strategic move on the narrator’s part; by emphasizing the constructed nature of all histories and narratives in general, the narrative compels readers to examine the power structures behind the act of telling.

Battling Historiographies

The introduction that precedes the first chapter of Oscar Wao—and provides the first of several narrative frames of the novel—begins with the description of the history of a curse, suggesting an ancient, almost mythical beginning to the condition of Dominicans in general and the Cabral-de León family, whose story will follow this preface, in particular. The novel begins with the following epic language:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (1)
The narrative opens with an elusive phrase: “They say...”. This phrase signals the injection of doubt from the beginning of the first sentence, an indicator of the alternative historical narration at play.

While the origins of the fukú are mysterious, the narrator emphasizes the very real power of the fukú as historical force:

But the fukú ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knew somebody who’d been eaten by a fukú, just like everybody knew somebody who worked up in the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about. But in those elder days, fukú had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Mólin. (2)

The narrator notes the hesitation of the populace to discuss this historical force out of fear, a fear which is then transferred to the persona of Trujillo. Reference to Trujillo comes early in the text. He is associated with the fukú, fingered as its heir and a representative of the historical power of force articulated in the novel.

Much of the exploration of official Dominican national history in the novel centers on the figure of the dictator. The first footnote, which follows the description of the fukú and stretches across two pages of text, begins on page 2 as follows: “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality.” This footnote, which goes on to describe several idiosyncratic features of Trujillo’s biography, indicates many key elements of the story. First, there is the prefacing of historical “facts” of Dominican history with the assertion that this history is not well known. Second, there is the assumption that the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” would necessarily include a discussion of Trujillo. The “you” invokes the reader’s complicity in the historical ignorance surrounding Dominican history; as the novel is written in English (though a highly particularized form of English) and relies heavily on United States popular cultural tropes, this interpolated “you” is likely to be a United States reader. This is important since the narrator goes on to describe the heavy influence of the United States in twentieth century Dominican history, including the United States occupation of the Caribbean nation and United States involvement in Dominican politics during the Trujillo dictatorship. This first footnote makes reference to historical facts such as the dates of the Trujillo regime, but then it goes on to recount elements of Trujillo’s biography that are usually not considered historically important, such as a list of the derogatory nicknames employed by Dominicans against him or a discussion of his sexual appetite. This is indicative of a third element of Yunior’s historiographic vision: emphasizing the quotidian and lived experiences over what are traditionally considered historical events, providing a popular view to counter the official view.

The fact that Trujillo becomes identified with the Dominican nation is clear in the text. Yunior describes him as
a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo); . . . for expecting, no insisting on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was “Dios y Trujillo”) . . . and for his almost supernatural abilities. (2–3)

The first striking element of this description is that, very early in the text, Yunior insists on the almost unbelievable nature of the historical reality of the Dominican Republic, which I discuss further in the section that follows on the novel’s invocation of magical realism. This quote also further explains the way in which Trujillo made himself the representative of the Dominican nation. The fact that Trujillo renames landmarks and even the capital city after himself shows that he sets out to occupy the physical spaces as well as the imaginary of the island. In the mention of the slogan “Dios y Trujillo,” there is a linguistic pairing of God and the dictator; Trujillo thus becomes the equivalent of a god in the national imaginary, an idea reinforced by his god-like powers to name and create. The final section of the above-cited quote also reminds the reader of the fact that Trujillo will be cast in this story as a more-than-human figure, though the story construes him as such not in the positive way that the dictator might have liked, but rather as a force that is supernaturally connected with evil.

The narrator goes on to enumerate Trujillo’s “outstanding accomplishments,” including the genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and “the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state” (3). Trujillo’s creation of the modern Dominican nation works via destruction and exclusion. Indeed, the choice of the term “forge” carries a double valence, indicating that the “modern state” is a creation while also suggesting a sense of illegitimacy, that the “modern state” is actually a forgery, a counterfeit. Yunior describes Trujillo’s intentions, explaining that Trujillo “aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries [Haiti and the Dominican Republic], a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people” (225). This vision of Trujillo as “architect of history” emphasizes the notion that history is malleable and expresses Trujillo’s desire for singular control and power over it. Yunior points not to a glorious national past, but rather a nation that is “forged” through oppressive violence. Scholars from Ernest Renan to Benedict Anderson have noted that the creation of a national identity often involves the strategic “forgetting” of moments of violence that accompany national formation. Yunior’s historiography subverts this configuration of the nation by refusing to forget that violence, insisting instead on narrating it as a way to exorcise its detrimental power over not only the de Leόns and Cabrals, but the nation as well. Yunior’s historiographic method emphasizes the power of imagination and popular conceptions of the nation, yet he also brings attention to the very real violence that accompanies the creation of the nation. In the case of the Dominican Republic, the founding is bathed in blood as Yunior notes that it is completed through the reinforcement of the border that abuts the Haitian half of the island, along with the genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans within the borders of the nation. In the novel, silence is
elemental to the historiography sponsored by the Trujillo regime because it is this silence that naturalizes the status quo and thus closes the possibility of change. It is a historiography characterized by silences, denials, and the violent repression of voices that might contradict the official narrative of heroic nationalism and the continuity of progress. The very form of the text being shaped by Yunior is meant to counteract a history of glorious nationalism embraced by the regime and personified in the figure of a heroic, all-powerful, hyper-masculine dictator.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao can indeed be read as a historiographic battle royal: a struggle over who controls the narration of history, including both its content (what is told) and form (the way in which it is told). Yunior specifically criticizes a historiographic strategy that he views as tied to the Trujillo dictatorship, which constituted the officially endorsed version of Dominican history for a large part of the twentieth century. Yunior’s historiography acts as an intervention against this official historiography, yet it is an imaginative reconstruction that can only take place in the literary realm, since traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by accepted forms of evidence whereas Yunior’s history explicitly relies on imagination and invention.

The differences between the two historiographic models—the dictatorship’s and Yunior’s—are often stark. Yunior develops a model that is meant to act as a direct counterpoint to the national history presented by the regime. First, Yunior presents a narrative voice that diverges from that of the Trujillan model. In contrast to a univocal voice of nationalistic rhetoric, Yunior’s voice is self-reflexive, conscious of alternative interpretations, and eager to represent other perspectives. Next, he presents a different cast of historical actors. Whereas the regime’s history has room for only one protagonist—Trujillo—Yunior’s story focuses on an entire family’s lived experiences of history, which in turn allows Yunior to focus on a larger cast of supporting characters. The story of the family might not at first glance seem very “historical”; major emphasis is placed on the love lives of the various characters as that which appears to propel their stories. Yet these seemingly private matters that traditionally lie outside of the realm of history in fact tie in to the public life of the nation. Abelard, Belicia’s father who is imprisoned before Belicia is born, is tortured and eventually killed for not allowing Trujillo to “have” one of his teenage daughters. Belicia’s affair with “the Gangster” leads to her brutal and almost fatal beating in the cane fields, as she later finds out that he is married to Trujillo’s sister. This beating spurs Belicia to migrate to New Jersey. Finally, Oscar’s love affair with a prostitute whose boyfriend is a captain in the Policía Nacional leads him to the same cane fields where his mother was beaten, though his trip results in death. A ruling principle of the historical trajectory presented by Yunior is that of love, while a ruling principle of the Trujillan model is that of violence.

In addition to these representations of the characters’ lived experiences of history, Yunior includes footnotes that are a bit more traditionally historical. These notes relate the stories of dissenters whose voices were also drowned out by the regime. So while Trujillan history is only concerned with the powerful, Yunior’s history includes the stories of those who resist despite their lack of power. Yunior’s history emphasizes outsiders and freaks, but also intellectuals and writers, instead of the Trujillan cast of thugs. Another important difference in narrative focus is evident in the fact that various family members get generous representation in the text. Alternating chapters shift focus between the family members’ stories, from Oscar to his mother Belicia to his sister Lola to Belicia’s father Abelard.
Yet another historiographic difference lies in the novel’s physical perspective vis-à-vis the Dominican nation. The position of the Trujillan regime is strictly nationalistic, from within the “Plátano Curtain” (which echoes the “Iron Curtain”) imposed by the dictatorship, while Yunior’s perspective is shaped by his diasporic position. He, like Oscar and Lola, ostensibly grows up in New Jersey. He writes in an American English that belies the deep influence of United States popular culture in the form of urban linguistic elements interspersed with “nerd” references to comics, *Lord of the Rings*, and Japanese anime. This position affords him the ability to see outside the confines of the nation, beyond the “Plátano Curtain.” In constructing his alternate history, he draws heavily on pan-Caribbean concepts of history, narrative, and thought (which I discuss at length in the next section of this article).

Yunior thus stages a narrative resistance in his recounting of history. He refuses to allow the subsuming of elements of history deemed irrelevant to the national story, instead rescuing them from oblivion and tracing an alternative trajectory and understanding of history from the fragments he collects and imagines. Yunior asserts the power of imagination as a disruptive force against the violence—both physical and representative—of the regime. Yunior’s story explicitly explores the need to criticize accepted histories, to reconceptualize history, and to break the cycle of tyranny by reinserting memory against historical forgetting. He alludes to the fact that he has interviewed many of the surviving family members in researching Oscar’s story and Dominican history. Still, Yunior never provides one single definitive answer or way to understand these stories, in this way interjecting the possibility of alternative experiences and rejecting history that claims a definitive interpretation.

Yunior’s attempts to lift the “Plátano Curtain” are complicated by the fact that this enforced silence is so automatic a response that it becomes an internalized principle in the lives of individuals. This is evidenced in the description of the insistent “amnesia” of Oscar’s mother, Belicia Cabral.4 There is quite a bit of history that Belicia attempts to forget. There is the family history of which she is only vaguely aware: the murders of her parents and older sisters before she was old enough to even know them. Then there are the elements of Belicia’s history that she simply does not wish to remember, opting instead for an idealized version of her past that suits her pride. The most conspicuous element of her violent past is evident in the grotesque scar on her back from a burn she suffered at the hands of a family who “adopted” Belicia as a small child to work as a slave on their farm. Yunior describes the scar as a “bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha” (257). This description likens her back to the landscape of war and the scars of the survivors of the Atomic bomb dropped on Japan during World War II. The scar that Belicia suffers as a victim of child abuse is also tangentially tied to larger national violence, reminding the reader that Belicia suffers this fate because she lost her family at the hands of the dictatorial regime.

The other violent event to which Belicia never alludes around her children is that of a nearly fatal beating in the cane fields at the hands of government officials. The narrator describes her silence as follows:

> It seems that . . . that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed
by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul. It says a lot about Beli that for forty years she never leaked word one about that period of her life: not to her madre, not to her friends, not to her lovers, not to the Gangster, not to her husband. And certainly not to her beloved children, Lola and Oscar. Forty years...

In fact, I believe that, barring a couple of key moments, Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilles. And from it forged herself anew. (258–59)

Again, Yunior links this condition of forgetfulness to a greater Caribbean context, using the negative prefix “un–” to dub the islands the “Untilles.” Forgetting is a seductive prospect when memory seems only to recall pain, but this consistently proves to be a very dangerous choice. This point is made most explicitly when neither Belicia nor her adoptive mother, La Inca, address the past even as they observe Oscar repeating Belicia’s mistakes and hurtling towards death. Yunior describes what seems to be an important pronouncement by Oscar’s sister after her brother has died: “Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (324). On the one hand this statement shows Lola’s explicit rejection and distancing from the past and more specifically her mother’s native country, yet this sentiment is belied by the use of the word “we,” which includes Lola, making her complicit in this internalization. Yunior’s above-quoted description of Belicia links her to Trujillo in using the term “forged” to describe Belicia’s recreation of herself via a negation of her past; the verb “forge” is precisely the one that Yunior uses to describe Trujillo’s creation of the nation and its history. It is this internalization of the Trujillan historiography that Yunior battles throughout the text by positing an alternative based on memory and inclusion.

One of the ways Yunior attempts this is by giving myriad examples of voices and experiences that the regime silenced by murdering scholars and activists, destroying documentation, and censoring to the point of cultivating self-censorship that permeates all aspects of the quotidian. In order to battle these silences, he first acknowledges them in several ways. There are recurrent references to lost books throughout the text. Oscar is a creative writer, mainly of science fiction, and he writes extensively in his journals. Yet his most important work, the one that he was composing in his final days in the Dominican Republic, is lost in the mail. Two generations earlier, Oscar’s grandfather Abelard, who was a doctor and “amateur ethnographer,” had every shred of paper in his house completely disappear at the hands of the regime after his imprisonment (213). These are only two of the many references to lost texts. Yunior often employs the use of ellipses and blanks in order to structurally emphasize the gaps in historical knowledge.

Another of Yunior’s recourses in his battle against dictatorial historical silences is the recovery or remembrance of lesser-known historical facts, which are often included in footnotes modeled after those of Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco (1992). As mentioned earlier, Yunior references the histories of activists and dissenters who attempted to combat Trujillo’s method during the dictatorship. Yunior does this to show that despite the lack of resistance on the part of Belicia Cabral or her father Abelard before her, Trujillo was not all-powerful and that resistance was—and remains—a possibility. He explains:
Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways, but there were plenty of people who despised El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who resisted. But Abelard was simply not one of them. Homeboy wasn’t like his Mexican colleagues who were always keeping up with what was happening elsewhere in the world, who believed that change was possible. He didn’t dream of revolution, didn’t care that Trotsky had lived and died not ten blocks from his student pension in Coyoacán; wanted only to tend to his wealthy, ailing patients and afterward return to his study without worrying about being shot in the head or thrown to the sharks. (226)

Yunior emphasizes not just the possibility of resistance, but also the importance of resistance. Indeed, he sees his narration as a part of a tradition of resistance. In his historical footnotes, Yunior tells the histories of resistance figures such as Jesús de Galindez, a Basque scholar and diplomat, whose research and doctoral thesis on Trujillo may have caused his kidnapping and murder, and leftist journalist Orlando Martínez who was killed under the Balaguer regime, an extension of the Trujillo government. He also tells of figures of resistance from a more distant past. One of these includes the figure after whom the original Cabral home is named: Hatüey. In a footnote, Yunior notes that Hatüey was “the Taíno Ho Chi Minh” (212). Bartolomé de las Casas recounts Hatüey’s resistance of the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century, chronicling that Hatüey remained defiant through his murder, refusing to be baptized as he was burned at the stake. The other early-sixteenth-century historical figure of resistance that Yunior describes, also in a footnote, is Anacaona, “One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the world” (244). Yunior explains that Anacaona, Taíno queen of Xaraguá in contemporary Haiti, was hanged by the Spanish because “she tried to resist” the Spanish invaders of the island of Hispaniola (244). He also notes that a “common story” about Anacaona states that she could have prevented this hanging had she agreed to marry a Spaniard “who was obsessed with her,” making the connection between Anacaona’s position and that of Abelard’s daughter in the hands of Trujillo and emphasizing the fact of her defiance even as she faced death (244). Along with the stories invented or augmented by his imagination, Yunior presents traditional historical references in order to ground his story in fact. Imagination is meant to fill in the gaps and to get to the truth that lies beyond the unevenly documented stories.

It is important to consider the position of the narrator in order to understand the goal of Yunior’s historiographic methods. Yunior is in many ways a mysterious narrator; the reader is alerted to the existence of the narrator in the preface, when the narrator mentions his “tío Rafa,” but the reader does not know that Yunior is the narrator until well into the novel. Yunior’s name is not referenced until pages 169 (“Yuni”) and 178 (“Yunior”). The reader also learns that “Yunior” is a nickname; his given name remains undisclosed. Once Yunior reveals his presence, however, the reader is not allowed to forget his role in the narrative. The intrusion of ambivalent statements serves as a reminder of the subjectivity underlying the history being narrated. In a footnote on page 132, before the reader even knows the narrator’s name, the reader becomes aware of the constructed nature of the story and the limitations of its narrator. After describing a romantic getaway taken by Belicia and her lover in the city of Samaná, the narrator provides the following footnote:
In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (132)

In this footnote, the narrator explicitly brings to the reader’s attention the fact that there is an element of artifice. He has imagined the setting, and perhaps even the entire trip taken by Belicia. This might cause the reader to question what else the narrator might have imagined; indeed, the more the reader learns about the narrator, the more s/he realizes the amount of things Yunior could not possibly know for certain about the story he relates. The reader learns that the story is subject to change and editing. In the next part of the paragraph cited above, the narrator also asserts his power to rewrite the story as he sees fit in order to best present the overall reality he seeks to put forth. He notes the necessity of historically inaccurate details like the anachronistic reference to “the perrito,” justifying them for aesthetic reasons, suggesting to the reader that history is a construction as well, and, like storytelling, it requires narrative choices.

Yunior makes clear that his version of history is not authoritative, though in so doing he does not reject its validity. Moreover, as the narrator-historian, he consistently shows that he is not infallible, nor does he hope to convince the reader of this. Not only does Yunior admit to his limitations, but he also often highlights them. In looking for a way to understand the reasons for Oscar’s death in the Dominican Republic, Yunior admits that he cannot posit a definitive answer:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying; you’ll have to decide for yourself. What is certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail—they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation. And it’s not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrals ain’t much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard’s imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more.

Which is to say that if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it. (243)

Neither the narrator nor the narrative is meant to be taken as unquestionable or monolithic, though they are meant to reveal elements of truth, especially in showing the uncertainties and ambivalences of history. Again, Yunior emphasizes the role of the reader as the ultimate interpreter of history.

Considering Yunior’s own admission of the power he holds as narrator, it is useful to consider his motivation for telling this story. Yunior seems to feel a deep need to recuperate a family history despite the fact that it is not his own. He retains a certain distance
from this story even though he is drawn into it at several points, as Lola’s sometime lover and Oscar’s sometime friend. One example of this uncertainty is evident in Lola’s narration. Lola is the only character, besides Yunior, who speaks in first-person narration. Yet the reader cannot be completely certain of what this narration means. Is this really Lola speaking? If so, how? Is she collaborating in the writing of the text, or is Yunior recording her thoughts? Who is Lola’s narrative audience? Is Yunior simply reconstructing Lola’s voice, writing her voice himself, as a way to regain a connection to her? If this last possibility is the case, does Yunior in a small way fall into the Trujillan model of narrative, as characters including Oscar (and perhaps Lola) are not allowed to speak for themselves? Indeed, Oscar’s surviving texts remain stored in Yunior’s refrigerators, unavailable to the reader. Yet it seems that Yunior encourages the reader’s questioning of his motives. The questions that the reader might ask belie the open-endedness that is central to the reader’s conception of Yunior as narrator. Despite these limitations, the novel implicitly wonders if this fictional representation is not more truthful than the official history in light of all that the latter excludes.

Caribbean Discourse in Diaspora

The story related by Yunior contains echoes of Latin American “Boom” era literature, most notably Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*. Some examples of magical realist elements in Díaz’s novel include the representation of the fukú as engine of historical development from the Conquest to the present, the supernatural power of women like La Inca who can save her daughter’s life through prayer, and the guardian mongoose that magically appears when Belicia and Oscar are in danger. History is cyclical in *Oscar Wao* as in *Cien años de soledad*. Yet Yunior’s narrative of the lives of Oscar and his family necessarily departs from a *Cien años de soledad* style of magical realism because he tells it from the perspective of diaspora decades after the original boom in magical realist production, in a sense providing a bridge between Macondo and McOndo.

Throughout the text, magical realism is presented as a Caribbean mode of understanding and representing history. Magical realism in the novel does not act as a gimmick, but rather as an intervention against the trajectory of conventional national history. It affords Yunior the means to connect his story to a Latin American, and specifically Caribbean, discourse regarding literary historical representation. The use of magical realism links Yunior’s narrative to the theorization of the magical realist genre as a way to account for the reality and history of Latin America, firmly locating the magical realist stories in specific geographical and historical contexts.

One example of this rooting of magical reality in Latin American tradition is the representation of the mongoose in the story. Early in the story, the “golden mongoose” seems like a quirky take-off on the guardian angel trope. The creature appears to Belicia when she is left for dead in the cane fields, to Oscar when he attempts suicide at the New Brunswick train station, and then again around the time of Oscar’s death. Yunior describes Belicia’s encounter with the mongoose as a mysterious one:
And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco. . . . But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived? So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. (149)

The mongoose tells Belicia to follow her for the sake of a son and daughter to come. The mongoose then sings, “In an accent she could not place: maybe Venezuelan, maybe Colombian. Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas” (150).

This episode is presented as an “extreme phenomenon” that is tied to Dominican and Caribbean history. Yunior even ties this “tolerance” of the seemingly supernatural to the survival of Dominicans through difficult historical periods. Yunior’s tone shifts between serious and playful. He acknowledges the fact that readers might not automatically accept the veracity of the story he relates, yet seems to imply that there is a truth to it “no matter . . . the truth.” In other words, there is an importance that overshadows the factual corroboration of the story. The fact that the mongoose speaks in an unidentifiable Spanish accent show that this creature is a Latin American figure of hazy origin, pan-American like Alejo Carpentier’s and Gabriel García Márquez’s vision of the genre of magical realism. The attribution of a Colombian accent might even be a playful nudge to the Colombian García Márquez as the world’s most recognized writer of the magical realist genre. Yet at the same time, this signals a departure from traditional magical realist narrative, which naturalizes seemingly magical phenomena. Rather than weaving this magic seamlessly into the narrative as magical realist texts traditionally do, Yunior calls attention to these moments, initially questioning though later validating them.

Another instructive discussion of the mongoose and its role in the story occurs in a footnote that provides a history of the creature:

Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record—675 B.C.E., in a nameless scribe’s letter to Ashurbanipal’s father, Esarhaddon—the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. (151)

The mongoose is recovered not only as a figure whose roots cover some of the same paths of Caribbean ancestry, but also as a resistance figure. The mongoose is an “enemy” to the powerful and a proponent of freedom. The narrator chooses a native figure as the vehicle of some of the “magic” in the story, but he also focuses on its history?

This model of magical realism allows Yunior to recover experiences that might not fit within the bounds of traditional European models of realism. Seemingly supernatural forces have real effects and power in these stories and histories. This is typical of magical realist texts, which insist on the reality of seemingly magical occurrences. This magical reality
happens when two worldviews come into contact. Alejo Carpentier gives the example of the Spanish conquistadores encountering a “New World” that is so different that it appears magical because it does not coincide with European conceptions of reality. In Díaz’s novel, Yunior emphasizes the idea that the story he tells contains a reality that goes beyond questions of belief in magic. When describing the fukú in the introduction, he explains: “Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family” (5). He shifts the focus from the verifiability of these histories to their presence in the stories of the population. Even Abelard, “an amateur ethnographer in the Fernando Ortiz mode,” seems to be a magical realist (213). While he is a doctor who has studied outside of the country and avoids politics at all costs, he also recognizes the “magic” of his reality. Yunior notes that before his death, Abelard was writing “a book in which [he] argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been true” (245). This text is another one that is unrecoverable to the narrator-historian, however, as every bit of documentation owned by Abelard is destroyed by the regime following his imprisonment.

The importance of history to the magical realist project is clear already in Alejo Carpentier’s early essay theorizing the emerging genre, entitled “De lo real maravilloso americano,” which was originally published in a newspaper in 1948, and then as an introduction to his novel El reino de este mundo in 1949. In discussing the connection between history and representational style, Carpentier asserts: “Arrastra el latinoamericano una herencia de treinta siglos, pero, a pesar de una contemplación de hechos absurdos, a pesar de muchos pecados cometidos, debe reconocerse que su estilo se va afirmando a través de su historia. . .” (“De lo real maravilloso americano” 114). A similar emphasis on the need for a style to fit the history particular to Latin America is expressed by Gabriel García Márquez in his 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In this speech, entitled “La soledad de América Latina,” García Márquez also emphasizes the ability of magical realism to represent reality where conventional forms fail, claiming: “el desafío mayor para nosotros ha sido la insuficiencia de los recursos convencionales para hacer creíble nuestra vida. Este es, amigo, el nudo de nuestra soledad’ (8). He further explains: “La interpretación de nuestra realidad con esquemas ajenos sólo contribuye a hacernos cada vez más desconocidos, cada vez menos libres, cada vez más solitarios” “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary’ (8–9). In Carpentier’s configuration of magical realism, the genre provides a native narrative lens through which to interpret Caribbean reality. David Mikics explains, “magical realism appeals to Caribbean writers because it addresses the weight of historical memory that survives in the day to day life of the West Indies” (373). Díaz’s novel takes up the charge of finding forms that can capture a reality that does not fit “esquemas ajenos.” Again, it is for this reason that Yunior frames the story through the use of Caribbean and United States popular cultural forms, pointing to these as the most appropriate to represent the reality lived by Oscar and his family as members of the Dominican diaspora.
Through the mixing of Caribbean and United States narrative forms, Yunior seeks in part to draw a connection between the histories of the two countries. He specifically hopes to tie the diaspora to the history of the Dominican Republic. He does this formally, through the use of genres native to the two countries, and also thematically. One example is the discussion of diaspora as a part of the “fukú story.” Yunior casts elements of United States national tragedy, like the Kennedy assassination or the war in Vietnam, as payback for United States interventions in the Dominican Republic. The narrator explains that, “My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo’s payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú” (5). The state of diaspora seems to lend itself to magical realist forms as it is by definition an encounter between two different worldviews.

At the same time as he engages magical realist representation and discourse, Yunior takes into account subsequent criticism of magical realism, as represented by the McOndo movement of the 1990s. Part of the criticism leveled against magical realism by Alberto Fuguet and others was already alluded to in Carpentier’s 1940s essay:

_Pero, a fuerza de querer suscitar lo maravilloso a todo trance, los taumaturgos se hacen burócratas. Invocando por medio de formulas consabidas que hacen de ciertas pinturas un monótono baratillo de relojes amelcochados, de maniquíes de costurera, de vagos monumentos fálicos, lo maravilloso se queda en paraguas o langosta o máquina de coser, o lo que sea, sobre una mesa de disección, en el interior de un cuarto triste, en un desierto de rocas. Pobreza imaginativa, decía Unamuno, es aprenderse códigos de memoria. (“De lo real” 117)_{11}_.

Carpentier’s essay warns against formulaic uses of literary genres. He explains that codification of “lo maravilloso” would make it a dissectible object rather than a stylistic mode, effectively quelling its power. Carpentier’s warning ties into part of the McOndian complaint against magical realism. Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, the editors of the 1996 _McOndo_ anthology, saw magical realism as a tool that has been co-opted as a gimmick that does not represent the real, contemporary issues facing Latin America. Their critique is framed by their introduction to _McOndo_, entitled “Presentación del país McOndo,” that alludes to the experiences of young South American writers at the Writer’s Workshop in Iowa who are criticized for not using magical realism. These writers came to view magical realism as an exotified marketing tool in the United States publishing world. However, I would argue that this criticism does not recognize magical realism’s potential for subversiveness when not used as a gimmick. Some writers (and other artists) might employ magical realism in part as a representational mode that exotifies the Latin American other, but this should not mean that magical realism cannot be used as an effective means of intervention. At the same time, there are problems with the works of writers like Fuguet, who present a reality that is still accessible to a relative few, often limited to the upper classes.\(^{12}\)

Yunior discusses this McOndian renunciation of literary predecessors also as a generational shift in worldviews, one that perhaps seeks to account for the emerging realities of globalization, Americanization, and migration. When Yunior describes the word “zafa,” which is supposed to work as a counterspell against fukú, he explains, “It used to be more
popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo. There are people, though, like my tío Miguel in the Bronx who still zafa everything. He’s old-school like that” (7). Yet despite Yunior’s nod to the skepticism regarding magical realism, he maintains its validity while reinvigorating it, fitting it to the history at hand by superimposing a literary and cultural model native to the United States: comics. Yunior’s imbrication of literary magical realism and comics draws out the connections between the two forms, including concepts of temporality, characterization, and historical vision. Other “nerd” genres—science fiction and fantasy most prominently, which Yunior sometimes refers to simply as “genre”—also figure heavily in the text. These forms provide historical and narrative models whose forms lie outside of the power structures Yunior wishes to resist. In his critical work entitled Postethnic Narratives, Frederick Luis Aldama highlights the importance of the choice of genre in “postethnic narratives” that employ what he terms “magicorealism.” In his examination of African American and Chican@ texts in conjunction with “postcolonial” British texts, he explains that magical realist novels tend to use narrative techniques that are “at the margins of the institutionally sanctioned critical eye” (33–34). The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao imbricates several genres that are often critically marginalized.

“Who More Sci-Fi Than Us?”: Nerd Genres and Comic Book Heroes

In the case of comics, this critical marginalization has been widely recorded. Only recently have critics begun to investigate comic books as an art form. Oscar Wao refers to both the superhero genre of comic books along with independent, more realistic comic books, including several important contemporary comic book artists like the Hernandez Brothers (Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario). The Hernandez Brothers’ comic production over the past few decades has been quite vast and varied.13 Gilbert Hernandez’s work includes the Palomar stories, while Jaime’s work includes the Maggie and Hopey stories. Both of these have been published in their joint Love and Rockets series, which has been quite revolutionary, representing Latin Americans and United States Latin@s in roles and stories that are far from stereotypical. In the introduction to one of the Love and Rockets collections, Music for Mechanics, the brothers articulate the exclusion of comics from critical dialogue and highlight the need for a critical discourse if the form is to grow.

Junot Díaz’s text theorizes comic books and related genres while employing them. The narrator ruminates on the applications and significance of these genres, linking them to somewhat more critically recognized literary genres. Díaz’s novel valorizes the comic genre, associating it with more traditionally literary work as well as historiographic and ethnographic studies. The comic genre becomes interwoven with a line of critical thought that Yunior traces, which includes such important Caribbean writers and scholars as Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Fernando Ortiz, Gabriel García Márquez, and Aimé Césaire.14

The novel continually reinforces the connection between the magical elements of the history related to the Caribbean cultural context and the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and comics. Oscar is an avid reader of fantasy and sci-fi. He also writes pieces that he
hopes might make him the “Dominican Tolkien” (192). Yunior, also an aspiring writer at Rutgers, initially claims not to understand Oscar’s literary interests. Through the narrative, though, Yunior begins to speculate about Oscar’s interest in “genre” and even incorporates its language and tropes in his own narration. In one footnote regarding Oscar’s love of “genre,” Yunior explains:

Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocated to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I’m guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. (21–22) 15

“Genre,” in the minds of Oscar and eventually Yunior, is a more flexible narrative form than traditional historical narrative. It allows for the exploration of alternative worlds that don’t comply with traditional realism. In this way, it is uniquely capable of addressing the reality of the diasporic subject. The text consistently asserts that “authoritative” history is not an adequate explanation. The heart of the text lies, rather, in the sections that employ fantasy. During a talk at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in March 2008, Junot Díaz noted the relationship between the immigrant experience and the act of reading science fiction; he said that both require the learning of new codes. In this sense, the text’s form requires the reader to enter into the position of the immigrant or outsider.

In one exemplary instance, Yunior comments on the casting of Oscar’s suicide attempt at the train station as a type of supernatural story. The idea of the fukú as the cause of his fall provides one way for Oscar to understand how he could survive his fall from a bridge above the station. Yunior explains:

Oscar, as you might imagine, found this version of the Fall very attractive. Appealed to the deep structures in his nerd brain. Mysterious books, a supernatural, or perhaps alien, dictator who had installed himself on the first Island of the New World and then cut it off from everything else, who could send a curse to destroy his enemies—that was some New Age Lovecraft shit. (245–46)

Here, Yunior explicitly discusses the importance of narrative structure, noting that a magical take on Oscar’s fall appeals to Oscar because of its consonance with the “deep structures of his nerd brain.”

The novel’s structure in fact derives partially from the comic book genre. The novel is loosely organized around four characters modeled after the Fantastic Four. Yunior calls himself “the Watcher” several times, referring to the character in Fantastic Four who comes to earth to observe the actions of the four protagonists and to help humanity. Yunior makes the connection between his adopted comic persona and the Caribbean, stating, “it’s hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on ‘la face cachée de la Terre’ (Earth’s hidden face)” (92). Yunior thus makes the connection between the
Caribbean experience and the experience of a character who is an outsider; both the comic image and Glissant’s image engage ex-centric experiences and hidden histories. Yunior’s decision to model the novel after the Fantastic Four comic series instead of, for example, Superman, emphasizes the focus of his historiography on antiheroes, outsiders, and the forcibly marginalized. Like the character of the Watcher in Yunior’s description, the other characters are also in many ways outsiders. Lola’s character is the rough equivalent of the Human Torch in the Fantastic Four, as her character is equated with rebelliousness, and she is sometimes explicitly connected to fire.

Oscar’s differences are markedly pronounced throughout the text; he does not fit the mold of the “typical” young male Dominican (according to Yunior’s definitions), as he is a “nerd” with romantic ideas about the world. His difference is not marked only in his attitude, but also in his physical bearing. His obesity marks him as the equivalent to the most physically obvious “freak” of the Fantastic Four: Thing. The reader is often reminded of Oscar’s physical difference. In one of these instances, Yunior describes Oscar’s physique: “[Oscar] examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernández’s Palomar” (29). Oscar’s weight is described in hyperbolic terms (“miles of stretch marks”) and explicitly equated with comic book figures. On a basic level, The Fantastic Four is a comic about figures whose differences are marked on their bodies. The bodies of the characters of Oscar Wao are also marked by their difference, as is clear with the figure of the mother, Belicia. When she is born to a white doctor and light-skinned black nurse, her dark black skin seems like a bad omen to both her family and the entire community. After she is orphaned, it is her dark skin that makes it easier for her extended family to give her away, which eventually leads to horrible abuse. Her blackness marks her as an outsider, a rejected body, as her blackness is precisely what Trujillo was attempting to exclude from the nation. Later, it is not her blackness but rather the spectacular sexuality of her adolescent body and her fertility that will lead to the near-fatal beating that causes her to flee to the United States in order to escape her attackers.

Another important dimension of the Fantastic Four comic, besides its representation of characters who are outsiders, is that of the ability of outsiders and “freaks” to be heroes. Comics allow Yunior to posit a different trajectory for the family. Instead of a pessimistic, apocalyptic vision, Yunior envisions Oscar as a hero, even though he might be a tragic figure or even a martyr. Oscar’s heroic nature emerges most clearly in the account of his final days. He is a romantic hero in his love for a prostitute in the Dominican Republic despite the fact that his relationship with her presents very real, physical danger for Oscar. The narrator connects Oscar’s quest for Ybón, the prostitute who is Oscar’s love object, with Oscar’s writing: “For twenty-seven days he did two things: he researched—wrote and he chased her” (317).

After Oscar’s death, Yunior at first presents a pessimistic vision of the future of the Cabral-de León family. A few months after Oscar’s death, however, Yunior receives Oscar’s final letter. It contains the “amazing news” that he finally lost his virginity to Ybón. In the letter, Oscar describes his love of the intimacies he and his lover share beyond the physical, explaining, “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335). The letter closes the novel in a way that is the
antithesis of Kurtz’s proclamation (“The horror! The horror!”) in Joseph Conrad’s colonial literary classic *The Heart of Darkness.* It also posits an ending that is markedly different from the apocalyptic vision of García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad.*

One of several endings proposed by the novel, this letter is perhaps the most important, as it comes at the physical end of the novel. It proposes the possibility of change instead of an “eternal return” (296). This hope is transferred to future generations, though, as Yunior envisions Lola’s daughter, Isis, as the inheritor of the history that he has recovered. When Yunior runs into the girl, he notices a type of amulet that she wears as protection: “on a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barrier shields against the Eye” (329). Lola attempts to shield her daughter from evil by providing her daughter physical reminders of their family history. Memory acts as a sort of talisman for her.

Yet Yunior insists on the necessity of documentation as a protection against evil forces. He imagines the day when the fukú will reach the young girl and she will come to him in search of her history:

... when it starts getting late I’ll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her brother’s books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything.

A light, a desk, a cot—I’ve prepared it all. (330)

Yunior thus asserts the importance of writing a historical narrative, of unearthing the past, as a way to protect against the fukú that works through silencing and ignorance.

**Conclusion: Documenting Resistance**

Díaz’s novel presents an attempt to write a new history of the Dominican Republic. First, it attempts to present a nation with a history, filling a historical void. Next, it attempts to present a history that is a part of a greater Caribbean history that can accommodate diaspora and its subjects. Through the use of magical realism, Díaz presents an amplification of Dominican and United States historical reality. Through the use of comics, Díaz attempts to inscribe the history of the Dominican diaspora in both national histories. He emphasizes the role of quotidian experiences of national subjects in the national story. Throughout, the narrator highlights the role of language and literature in historiographic production. He also underscores the importance of writing history in new ways with new—or newly combined—forms capable of including experiences usually unexplored in traditional history, all while insisting on the impossibility of telling the whole story.
5. Díaz has acknowledged his use of Chamoiseau’s 3.

4. Belicia Cabral’s name might bring to the reader’s mind the name of Urania Cabral, one of the pro-

3. The focus on Trujillo’s hyper-masculine sexuality recalls Cristina García’s 2.

2. Junot Díaz’s work has garnered critical recognition in both United States and Latin American fora. The most notable United States prize he has received has, of course, been the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. His engagement with Latin American literature has also earned him recognition in Latin American critic circles. One such writer is Conjunto, which is the English-language edition of the book. The name Conjunto includes being named one of the “Bogotá (39 escritores menos de) 39,” as a part of the Hay Festival Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) 2007. The festival’s jurors (three Colombian writers) named the thirty-nine most important Latin American writers under thirty-nine years of age, recognizing Díaz for Oscar Wao. On the list, Díaz is classified as a Dominican writer and in fact is the only writer from the Dominican Republic who made the list (see the “Bogotá 39” website). One other Latino writer, Daniel Alarcón (categorized as a Peruvian writer), was recognized by the festival for his 2007 novel Lost City Radio. Through this and other younger writers than Díaz, they appear to be bringing a new generation of Latin American writers who explore Latin@ identity as not necessarily constituted by the notion of a lamentable “in-betweenness,” but rather one that offers a multiplicity of possible affiliations. Indeed, Alarcón claims to be as comfortable in Spanish as he is in English; though he wrote his novel in English, he collaborated in its Spanish translation and he is an associate editor of the Peru-based journal Etiqueta Negra.

1. This is, of course, not the only way of understanding magical realism. Many scholars have discussed the use of magical realism in various non-Latin American literatures, and have traced its roots also to non-Latin American sources. For example, on the subject of European magical realism in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Guenther.
1. It is useful to note the slippage between Yunior in Glissant’s essays in Hernandez Bros. illustrations have also accompanied some of Junot Díaz’s short stories published for an excellent discussion of McOndo, including the problematic connection between Fuguet’s, “The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bu- Doris Sommer argues that Latin American Boom writers rejected the tradition of “national romances” Anacaona was also a poet; she is said to have created areitos, a musical form of the Tainos which was complex in its structure, used drums and sometimes flutes and seashell trumpets, could last for days, and entailed collective singing and dancing by masses of people” (Sublette 63). Sublette also mentions an areito conducted by Hatuey during his visit to Cuba to warn the Tainos about the arrival of the Spaniards (63). Though the areitos did not survive, some historians believe that Tainos used the form in part as a way to orally transmit their history. Yunior might locate in the two figures of Hatuey and Anacaona not just elements of resistance, but also figures that transmit their histories via artistic means. While Diaz’s novel does not reference the areito, this musical form is sometimes referenced in popular culture, including in music by Dominican Juan Luis Guerra (1999 album Areito, which includes lyrics in Arawak) and in the reference to the “areito de Anacaona” in Cheo Feliciano’s salsa song “Anacaona.”

7. The use of indigenous figures, histories, cosmogonies, folklore, etc., is an important element of many magical realist texts, and features prominently in works by authors who are often grouped into the magical realist canon, including Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, and Gabriel García Márquez. One critical work that explores the use of indigenous sources in García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad is Corwin’s La transposición de fuentes indígenas en Cien años de soledad.

8. Bernal Díaz, sin embargo, había superado las hazañas de Amadís de Gaula, Belianis de Grecia y Florismarte de Hircania. Había descubierto un mundo de monarcas coronados de plumas de aves verdes, de vegetaciones que se remontaban a los orígenes de la tierra, de manjares jamás probados, de bebidas sacadas del cacto y de la palma, sin darse cuenta aún que, en ese mundo, los acontecimientos que ocupan al hombre suelen cobrar un estilo propio en cuanto a la trayectoria de un mismo acontecer” (Carpentier, “De lo real maravilloso americano” 114). “Without realizing it, Bernal Díaz bested the brave deeds of Amadís of Gaul, Belianis of Greece, and Florismarte of Hircania. He had discovered a world of monarchs crowned with plumes of green birds, vegetation dating back to the origins of the earth, food never before tasted, drink extracted from cacti and palm trees, but he did not realize that in such a world, events tend to develop their own style, their own unique trajectories” (Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America” 83).

9. “Latin Americans drag a legacy of thirty centuries behind them, but in spite of a record of absurd deeds and many sins, we must recognize that our style is reaffirmed throughout our history” (Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America” 83).

10. Doris Sommer argues that Latin AmericanBoom writers rejected the tradition of “national romances” that drew inspiration from “esquemas ajenos” such as those provided by James Fennimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans, Stendahl’s The Red and the Black, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie (16–17, 55).

11. “The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bureaucrats. By invoking traditional formulas, certain paintings are made into a monotonous junkyard of sugar-coated watches, seamstress’s mannequins, or vague phallic monuments: the marvelous is stuck in umbrellas or lobsters or sewing machines or whatever on a dissecting table, in a sad room, on a rocky desert. Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart” (Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America” 85).

12. For an excellent discussion of McOndo, including the problematic connection between Fuguet’s concept of McOndo and neoliberalism, see Palaversich. Fuguet has since tried to distance himself from McOndo, stating that he will never allow the McOndo anthology to be reprinted. In 2009, two years after the publication of Oscar Wao, Daniel Alarcón and Diego Treles Paz have declared the beginning of a “Post-Post-Boom.”

13. Hernandez Bros. illustrations have also accompanied some of Junot Díaz’s short stories published in The New Yorker.

14. Glissant’s essays in Caribbean Discourse are particularly relevant to the novel’s invocations of Caribbean history, language, and identity.

15. It is useful to note the slippage between Yunior in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, who at least resembles the Yunior who is the narrator in Drown (Díaz has sometimes explicitly stated that the two Yuniors are the same character), and Oscar. In Oscar Wao, it appears that after Belicia leaves the Dominican Republic, she does not return except to visit. If this is the case, then Oscar would have been born in the United States, and not have spent his early years in the Dominican Republic. It is Yunior who immigrated to the United States as a child, not Oscar. Thus, Yunior’s slip of presenting his own history as Oscar’s might indicate the narrator’s appropriation of Oscar’s story or perhaps
the desire to draw a connection between the two. It is not clear whether or not this particular slip is accidental on Yunior’s part. However, throughout the novel, Yunior’s affinities with Oscar become quite evident, though Oscar is more willing to admit to the “nerd” tendencies that Yunior attempts to mask. Yunior’s appropriation of Oscar’s story could also support the reading of Oscar Wao as a Künstlerroman; the novel tracks the desires of both Oscar and Yunior to write fiction, as both begin their writing “careers” in “genre” writing (sci-fi and noir, respectively), and the novel can be read as Yunior’s attempt to find a way to narrate the story of his friend in order to find his own writer’s voice.

16. Díaz noted the relationship between the Fantastic Four characters and Yunior, Oscar, Lola, Belicia, and Abelard during his talk at the Hammer Museum.

17. In her analysis of the earlier short story version of Oscar Wao, Ch’ien also notes the Conrad echo in the epistolary “The beauty! The beauty!” suggesting that “His last words grant him an intelligibility unexperienced in life” (228).

WORKS CITED


