WAO AND WALCOTT: RENEWING HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Wao and Walcott: Renewing History and Identity in the Postcolonial Novel* by Valerie Hamada Young, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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In response to the continuous production of postcolonial literature that perpetuates the pain of the past, St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott advocates for a celebratory approach to writing, one that involves embracing a "historyless" and Edenic world in which writers are free to generate their own histories and identities. This thesis will explore the application of Walcott's ideals in Junot Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), in which a constant gesturing to the fictionality of the text exposes the constructed nature of history and mutability of identity in order to produce the possibility of new worlds powered by imagination.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Páginas en Blanco: Rewriting and Renewing History</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Who More Sci-Fi Than Us? Reimagining Identity</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Since the effects of postcolonialism date back to the very inception of colonization in the fifteenth century, it comes as no surprise that today’s writers are still striving to produce literature that is a unique expression of their cultural selves, unfettered by the considerable weight of history and the indelible presence of their oppressors. Beginning in the 1970’s, a flurry of postcolonial scholarship resulted in groundbreaking works such as Edward Said’s Orientalism and Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Both of these texts address the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized that has resulted in a seemingly inseparable jumble, within which neither colonizer nor colonized can be acknowledged without implicating the other. This fundamental conundrum is compounded by the wide array and combinations of circumstances that contribute to each individual colonial experience, such as the differences between “invaded” and “settler” colonists, the former including those whose territories were forcibly colonized, and the latter, those who were “transplanted” as in the case of the colonists of the United States and Canada (Ashcroft et al. 24). Though each postcolonial writer creates a distinctive voice while engaging with the specific range of cultural and situational factors that influence his or her work, all writers, in their efforts to represent, rewrite, or defy the products of colonialism, must confront questions regarding history and identity.
But in order to explore history and identity effectively, postcolonial writers must first consider the effects of their medium, since many of them employ the languages of their oppressors. In the case of British colonies, the English language was used as a means of impressing the values of European culture upon colonists, so authors who choose to write in English run the risk of perpetuating these values even as they attempt to subvert them. Many countries today, such as Australia and the United States, have developed their own standards for the English language, but the "Received Standard English" of the British Empire remains influential, even in the theories put forth by critics like Said and Spivak themselves, whose "rarefied poststructuralist approach" might, in fact, "re-colonize the post-colonial world by re-incorporating its agendas into metropolitan academic concerns" (Ashcroft et al. 203). To avoid these complications altogether, some authors, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, have renounced English altogether, choosing to write in their native languages (Ashcroft et al. 130).

Other writers, in an effort to avoid or combat potential problems when using the English language, have adopted a number of different approaches, which include, but certainly are not limited to, interspersing a text with untranslated words, contrasting local dialects or appropriated forms of English with those of the colonizers, and integrating English into the rhythmic or syntactic structures of other languages. The English-based literature of the Caribbean features a particularly rich variety of linguistic commingling due to the colonization of the islands by the
Spanish, French, English, and Dutch. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* aptly use the term "Caribbean continuum" when referring to the ease with which the many languages and dialects of these islands weave together into a cohesive whole despite the fundamental differences of each component (71). Linguistic flexibility of this kind is especially valuable since it provides writers a greater pool to draw from as they piece together a vision of the hybridized reality formed by their postcolonial encounters.

While some writers take a less positive stance, viewing English as a tool to be used against its progenitors or a standard to be rejected, St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott considers postcolonial writing to be the "elemental privilege of naming the new world which annihilates history" (372). For Walcott, language is a gift to be celebrated, to be used creatively to start afresh. He believes that postcolonial writing has been dominated too often by those "who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia" (371). Desperate to recover a sense of self by reaching back through time, these writers end up reliving the pain of a fickle past within which their mastery of "the language of the torturer [...] is viewed as servitude, not as victory" (371). In response, Walcott advocates for an "Adamic" approach to writing, one that empowers postcolonial writers by giving them control over their identities and histories as they capitalize upon the two worlds within them by generating something unique (371). Being of African and European descent, Walcott extends
his heartening words to both oppressor and oppressed when he writes that “[man] is still capable of enormous wonder” (371).

Taking a page from Derek Walcott, Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), is just such a wonder, though it may seem to fall short of “wondrous” at first glance. Over the course of the novel, Oscar, an overweight, Dominican-American “GhettoNerd” who is obsessed with science fiction and fantasy is repeatedly rejected by the women with whom he constantly falls in love, before he dies in a cane field (11). However uninteresting Oscar may appear, Díaz’s portrayal is a masterful celebration of his postcolonial experience, embodying Walcott’s ideals through its vibrant blend of languages and reworking of history. Critics invariably acknowledge *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* for its unapologetic mixture of languages and genres, and juxtaposition of past and present, ordinary and extraordinary, and cultural references both high and low. Some find Díaz’s narration energetic and expansive; others condemn it as erratic and alienating. Some think that Díaz encapsulates America; others think that he immerses readers in the immigrant experience. These opposing interpretations of the novel demonstrate how completely the text embodies the combination of worlds created by the characters’ postcolonial and diasporic experiences.

This thesis will argue that, through *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz pushes beyond representation and rewriting of postcolonial experiences by
advocating for the fresh start of which Derek Walcott writes. Díaz, like Walcott, sees history not as something to be scrutinized nor rehashed, but as a tether that draws people back into the trauma and subjugation of the past. Though the novel takes the form of a historical narrative, this creative reconstruction of the de León/Cabral family's story is only a means to an end. As Díaz himself has said, Yunior's failures are at the heart of the tale ("Mil Máscaras"). Bound to history by his attempts to recreate it, Yunior remains a slave to the past, unable to celebrate himself and the hybridity that Oscar embodies through the qualities that Yunior perceives as "un-Dominican" (11). However, Yunior's failures are mitigated by the fact that he repeatedly gestures to the fictionality of his fictional recounting. Through his examination of the constructed nature of history and mutability of identity, Yunior dispels the stagnation caused by the pain of the past and crises of identity, thereby promoting the possibility of a clean slate, even though he is unable to generate such a starting point for himself. In this thesis, Walcott's concept of the Edenic clean slate or new world will not represent a beginning without any kind of history attached to it, but what might be described more accurately as a palimpsestic slate, upon which traces of a prior history can be detected. While history can be allayed, it cannot be discarded altogether. However, in Walcott's creative and optimistic new world, the old "supplies the energy in the new" (Ashcroft et al. 50).

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the juxtapositions, discrepancies, genres, and silences that Yunior uses to debunk the myth of history and eliminate
the weight of the past in order to start afresh. Beginning with a brief overview of the history of the Dominican Republic spanning a five-hundred-year period of domination by the Spanish, French, and dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, this chapter will focus on Yunior’s attempts to dispel the negative effects of history by revealing the fictive nature of history in general. Though Yunior’s exposure of history involves engaging with the past as he rewrites it, his efforts reduce history to little more than a fragmentary text that can be manipulated and selectively revived, thereby dismantling the constraints of the past and allowing for the creation of Walcott’s new worlds.

The second chapter will explore the way that Yunior also applies Walcott’s clean slate concept to identity by employing the languages of science fiction and fantasy when examining the fluidity of Oscar’s character. The chapter begins by noting that science fiction, fantasy, and cultural identity are bound together by their relationships with difference. Likewise, Oscar is the embodiment of difference, out of place wherever he goes. As Oscar internalizes the works of science fiction and fantasy that he loves, and creates worlds within the realms of Dungeons and Dragons as well as in his own works of fiction, the cultural and social structures that categorize and marginalize fade into irrelevance. In the world of the novel, identity, like history, becomes a space for creativity and regeneration.
Hybridity will play an important role in this thesis. Once spurned as a denial of origins or a meaningless category into which all postcolonial literature would fall, hybridity has been embraced as a helpful term for addressing the development of enmeshed cultures as mass migration and diaspora result in “rootless histories” and a global culture that is “‘at home’ with this motion rather than in a particular place” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 218). Hybridity can be liberating, privileging “spatial plurality” over the linear temporality associated with European dominators (Ashcroft et al. 34). It is also an invaluable tool for authors like Díaz, whose embodiment of two or more cultures enables them to discuss postcolonialism without engaging with the usual colonizer/colonized binary. Historically, the hyphenated term “post-colonial” has been used to stress the time period during which events took place or literature was produced, in order to anchor the term to the “material” effects of colonization and the marginalization of cultures (Ashcroft et al. 198). While it is important to recognize these effects, this thesis will employ the term “postcolonial” without a hyphen, in keeping with the spirit of hybridity and diaspora, both of which privilege space over time. Moreover, the hyphen seems to designate a gap that does not resonate well with the fluidity and fusion of cultures that are at the heart of this project.

In an increasingly hybridized and diasporic world, it is important to recognize history and identity as parts of a whole that should not be repressed nor rejected, and to find ways to express experiences without dwelling on the pain of
the past, choosing instead to capitalize upon the complexity and depth of character created by the blending of cultures. In light of the violent acts that fill the pages of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the pervasive, detrimental effects of colonialism, this positive stance runs the risk of seeming hopelessly idealistic and lax in its treatment of the past. However, this thesis aims not to pardon, defuse, nor pass over the terrible events described in the novel or the residual impact of colonialism at large, but to highlight the empowering message that emerges from the text, thereby promoting the possibility of applying the past in the form of the wisdom that will shape the future.

In his essay “The Novelist as Teacher,” Chinua Achebe writes of the importance of educating others by teaching them that “their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them,” which emphasizes the divide between Europeans and those whom they colonized (105). Such a strategy seems untenable in today’s globalized cultural climate, but a new generation, including authors Edwidge Danticat and Nalo Hopkinson, is taking a more receptive and diversified approach when sharing its views on postcolonialism. Danticat values and focuses her work on individuals, steering clear of “fights over writers in-country/outside-country, authenticity, [and] identity” (Horn 25), and Hopkinson blends mythology, tricksters, cyborgs, Creole vernacular and “streetwise techno slang” when crafting her postcolonial stories (Latham 338). Junot Díaz considers educating others
through his works to be his “duty” as a “civic individual” (“Junot Díaz with Sean San Jose”). Thus, as a tale about Yunior, a composition instructor at a community college, and Oscar, a high school English and history teacher, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, authored by a Dominican-American Professor of Writing at MIT, serves as the ideal novel from which to extract a twenty-first-century take on the postcolonial condition.

For Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* represents a big step in his development as an author, one that requires crossing into the worlds of the novel and science fiction. Both of his other major works, *Drown* (1997) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2013), are short-story collections, a format that Díaz prefers since the spaces between each story emphasize the “longings and silences” that reflect his continued engagement with liminal themes (“This Week”). Apart from being his only novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* also marks Díaz’s first foray into the genres of science fiction and fantasy, both of which resonate so well with the marginalized histories and individuals in the text. Forging a path through unfamiliar territory, Díaz generates a novel of new worlds nested within new worlds that is a wondrous implementation of Walcott’s vision.
CHAPTER ONE
PÁGINAS EN BLANCO: REWRITING AND RENEWING HISTORY

In 1492, the island of Hispaniola witnessed the birth of colonialism, as present-day Santo Domingo became Spain's first permanent settlement in the New World. Shortly thereafter, the native population of Taino Indians was enslaved and, within fifty years, nearly eliminated altogether, causing the Spanish to turn to Africa for slaves. In 1697, the French claimed the western side of Hispaniola, now known as Haiti. Though they shared an island, the two colonies, under the control of different countries, developed into two very distinct cultures, which caused bloody power struggles and friction that continue to this day, as Haitians illegally immigrate to the Dominican Republic to escape extreme poverty. For centuries, the Dominican Republic has had to endure domination by other countries, including the United States, and even after it gained its independence, it was dominated from 1930 to 1961 by one of its own citizens, dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, whose cruelty and greed remain legendary.

The details of this history fill the first seven pages of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, as Yunior, the novel's primary narrator, connects the origins of the Dominican Republic with fūku, the so-called curse that afflicts the de León/Cabral family. According to Yunior, fūku dates back to "the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola" and is responsible for a chain of destruction that claims the lives of Christopher Columbus (1) and John F. Kennedy alike (5). Spanning centuries and
crossing borders, fúku embodies the history of conquest and oppression that began in Santo Domingo and continues to creep out into the rest of the world. As Yunior says, “We are all of us its children, whether we know it or not,” pointing to the fact that the effects of colonialism are so deeply embedded in both Dominican and North American cultures that they are perpetuated by all, even those who “missed [their] mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2). Though Yunior is speaking primarily to a North American audience, there can be no doubt that the effects of colonialism reach out to encompass a world that is joined by the Internet and widespread circulation of its people. However bleak this may seem, Yunior provides a solution in the form of the word “zafa,” which is the “one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you” (7). According to *The New World Dictionary*, “zafa” is the second person imperative form of the verb “zafar,” which means “to free” (507). Hence, when Yunior proclaims his novel to be “a zafa of sorts” (7), he intends for it to free him of Oscar’s story, which “happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around [his] throat” (6).

However, since they are tied to the history of the Dominican Republic, Oscar’s story and Yunior’s zafa take on a much larger significance. Given the title of the novel, it can be surprising to find that less than half of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* directly involves the details of Oscar’s somewhat underwhelming boy-meets-girl story. It may seem as though the tales of Oscar’s sister, mother, and grandfather unnecessarily interrupt Yunior’s recounting, preventing Oscar’s
experiences from unfolding in an orderly way. But since Oscar’s identity is inextricably linked to the history of his ancestors and homeland, it becomes necessary for Yunior to chronicle the history of Oscar’s family and the Dominican Republic in order to produce a representation of Oscar’s life replete with insights regarding his motivations and beliefs. The novel is more than a historical account; it also functions as an examination of the nature of history in general. By contrasting individual and collective histories, and employing footnotes and various genres, Yunior presents a fragmentary and cyclical narrative that demonstrates that history, while formative, is not only fluid and mutable, but also fictional. Thus, Yunior’s zafa dispells the constraints of history, allowing for the possibility of a new world within which to generate a new history.

Yunior’s treatment of history strongly resonates with the ideals put forth by Derek Walcott in his essay “The Muse of History” (1974). Walcott praises “New World” poets such as Pablo Neruda and Walt Whitman because they are able to recognize that “history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory,” which leads them to reject history as “a kind of literature without morality” (370-371). For Walcott, history “petrifies into myth” whenever it is removed from its place in time, as it is the moment it is recorded (371). As time elapses, history fades away proportionally. Thus, Walcott sees the present as an Eden, as a starting point from which to build a new world, just as Yunior hopes to wipe the slate clean by exposing the fictionality of historical accounts (372).
In addition to producing the Eden of Walcott’s vision that helps to expunge the pain inflicted by colonialism, Yunior’s exposure of the fictive nature of history also aims to undo the “official” histories put forth by Rafael Trujillo and his regime. In 1930, Trujillo was almost unanimously elected president after his followers attempted to assassinate the other candidates and forcibly prevented officials from discovering that the election had been rigged. This was only the beginning of Trujillo’s unethical and total dominance over the Dominican Republic. By terrorizing the people into silence, building monuments to himself, and issuing books and daily press releases extolling his virtues, Trujillo imposed upon his country a history in which he was worshipped by all. One of the books penned by his secretary, Abelardo Nanito, was so widely distributed that it went into multiple editions in Spanish and English, and Harry S. Truman had a copy in his private study (Derby 303). As Yunior discovers while trying to piece together the past, Trujillo’s reign had such a lasting impact that the whole of the Dominican Republic seems to be suffering from “amnesia” decades after Trujillo’s death (258). Derek Walcott believes that this “amnesia is the true history of the New World,” a condition that reaches back to the fifteenth century, since the only way to prevent the perpetuation of the past is to stop actively engaging with it (372). Though in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao Yunior focuses primarily upon eclipsing the singularity of Trujillo’s history with the histories of his many characters, he is responding also to a long lineage of oppression stretching back to the earliest moments of colonialism.
The novel opens with two contrasting epigraphs that set individual histories against traditional, collective histories in an effort to emphasize the differences between these two types of accounts. In the first epigraph, from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comic book series, "brief, nameless lives" are pitted against Galactus, an all-powerful cosmic being who devours planets and can alter reality, the latter attribute of which applies directly to the compiling of historical accounts. In the second epigraph, an excerpt from Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner Flight," the narrator muses over whether he is "nobody" or "a nation." The first epigraph juxtaposes individuals and a massive, infallible and definitive conglomeration of worlds, and the second, an individual and a country, which clearly introduces the novel's mission to, as Monica Hanna puts it, "emphasize the quotidian and lived experiences over what are traditionally considered historical events" (502). In her article about "battling historiographies," Hanna argues that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "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 [...] allowing for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant, elements" (500). While this is certainly the case, Hanna’s claim that Yunior “sees [his recounting] as more truthful” is debatable since Yunior goes out of his way to continually question the veracity of his account (501). Ultimately, his retelling of Oscar’s story functions not as a truthful
representation of history, but as an exposé of the fictive and transient nature of history at large.

The epigraphs are followed by an introduction that chronicles through a string of passive sentence constructions the history of fuku, of the curse that connects the characters of the novel to each other and to their ancestors:

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. (1)

Thus, the novel opens with language befitting a legend, presenting the antagonist of the novel as mythological, and referring through the use of “They say” to oral tradition, both of which contrast with “official” written history. This first sentence is also remarkable because, lacking a definitive subject and referring to an unidentified “they” as the source, it sets an ominous tone for a historical account that is riddled throughout with unknowns and “paginas en blanco” (119). Moreover, Yunior concludes this introductory section by referring to The Wizard of Oz when he writes, ”One final final note, Toto, before Kansas goes bye-bye,” in effect comparing the history that follows to the dreamland that Dorothy explores after her home is swept away by a tornado, spiraling from one world into another. This image from
the 1939 film perfectly sums up Yunior's view of history as both fantastic and
cyclical. Moreover, the black and white scenes in Kansas that depict Dorothy’s “real
world” and represent Yunior’s present contrast completely with the colorized,
fanciful, and obviously imaginary world that is the product of Dorothy’s head injury
and representative of Yunior’s creative rendition of Oscar’s story.

Yunior also draws a comparison between the personal historical accounts of
the characters in the novel and his own, pitting individual histories against one
another in order to demonstrate the constructed nature of history even at a
personal level. When he begins to tell Abelard’s story, he writes, “When the family
talks about it at all – which is like never – they always begin in the same place: with
Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo” (211). While this introduction
shows that the de León histories converge at this point, Yunior quickly dispels this
brief moment of accord by adding:

There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure – if you
ask me I would have started when the Spaniards “discovered” the
New World – or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916 – but if
this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who
am I to question their historiography? (211)

This statement addresses the subjectivity of historical accounts, and also points to
the relationship between the family’s history and that of their homeland. Nestled
within the broader historical landscape that Yunior considers to be a "better" beginning, the de León history loses its individuality as other individual stories supplant and compound one another, merging into a reductive, collective mass.

In order to emphasize the differences between these individual and collective tales, Yunior’s recounting of the histories of the de León/Cabral family and the Dominican Republic progress side by side. In fact, the history of Oscar’s homeland frequently interrupts the flow of his tale in the form of footnotes. At a glance, the space between the body of the text and the footnotes provides a physical representation of the division between individual and collective histories. As Jennifer Harford Vargas notes, the main text also appears to be double-spaced while the footnotes are not, which resembles the work of a student juxtaposed against a more authoritative source (20). Although this seems to suggest that the body of the text offers a more subjective, less developed interpretation, Yunior’s footnotes are written in the same voice as the main text and appear to present an equally subjective take on events. The first footnote begins, “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history,” which seems to come from a position of authority, addressing a presumably American audience and promising a traditional history lesson (2). However, what follows is a description of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina full of expletives and references to science fiction. While the tone and content of these footnotes, as Hanna posits, do much to rework “a history of glorious nationalism embraced by the regime,” belittling Trujillo and
providing an antithetical view of his presidency, they also establish from the beginning that all of the historical accounts within the world of the novel are, to some extent, works of fiction (504).

To compound the impact of the footnotes, Yunior also provides a third account in the form of parenthetical asides that function in multiple ways, often providing commentary, conflicting viewpoints, quotes, or embellishment. These have the effect of creating a division between Yunior’s own account and his comments upon that account, adding another layer of uncertainty to his tale. When writing about Jack Pujol’s father, Yunior describes him as “a heavy-duty player in Bani, ([who] would be instrumental in bombing the capital during the revolution, killing all those helpless civilians, including my poor uncle Venicio),” momentarily weaving his personal history into Beli’s (89). He also uses parenthetical remarks within footnotes, commenting on his comments, providing his interpretation of a history that is already an alternative to “official history” as he describes Balaguer’s “asceticism (when he raped his little girls he kept it real quiet)” (90). Yunior continues to chronicle how Balaguer “order[ed] the death of journalist Orlando Martinez” but in his memoirs “left a blank page, a pagina en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death” after which Yunior adds, “(Can you say impunity?)” expressing his contempt for a crime that went unpunished and a historical account that will forever remain incomplete (90). At other times, Yunior’s parenthetical comments can dispel completely the credibility of his accounts, as
when he writes, "[Beli] never would admit it (even to herself), but she felt utterly
exposed at El Redentor" which leads to the conclusion that no one, including Yunior
and Beli, should have been able to record such feelings (83).

In addition, Yunior's account is full of discrepancies that point to the
contradictions and inaccuracies that can comprise historical reports. Lola's hair is
said to be straight (52), but also curly (18); Abelard's daughter's name is spelled
"Jacquelyn" (218) on one page then "Jacqueline" on the next (219); La Inca's version
of Oscar's first meeting with Ybón conflicts with his own (289); Lola introduces
Oscar to "the boyfriend she'd dated as a teenager" (278) when living in the
Dominican Republic, even though, according to Lola's own account, her boyfriend,
Max, was killed in a traffic accident (209); Oscar spent the first "couple of years of
his life" in the Dominican Republic even though Beli had already escaped to the
United States (21). Monica Hanna refers to this last inconsistency as "slippage" that
"might indicate the narrator's appropriation of Oscar's story or perhaps the desire
to draw a connection between [Yunior and Oscar]" (519). Either way, her surmises
only affirm again that Yunior's historical account is necessarily fictive to some
degree.

To further stress the fictional aspects of history, Yunior's account of the de
León/Cabral history takes the form of a choppy series of installments that
emphasize the fragmentary nature of historical texts. The 331-page novel is broken
into three parts that include seven chapters that are divided into seventy subsections, all of which are frequently interrupted by line breaks. Yunior’s use of an episodic format that resembles the comic book layouts that Oscar loves functions in at least two ways. First, it repackages Dominican history within a uniquely American genre, one that is especially significant in this case since it has been severely marginalized like the individual histories Yunior hopes to revive. Secondly, it adds to Yunior’s story the fantastic and larger-than-life brio of the superheroes associated with comic books, again emphasizing the fictive quality of his retelling. The many subsections also reach back to the grand traditions of picaresque and epistolary novels, the first of these genres casting Oscar’s tale in the satirical glow of the foolhardy Don Quixote, and the second granting the tale just a hint of credibility as Yunior reproduces letters and journal entries, occasionally attributing the text of his story directly to others, as he does when describing Ybón in “(Oscar’s words now)” (282) and Ybón speak[ing] “as recorded by Oscar” (289). The headings of the subsections of the novel also gesture to the fictitious nature of the account, such as the mythical, epic, and historical overtones of “The Golden Age” (11) and the way that Oscar’s story takes on the weight of Charles Swann’s ill-fated romance in \textit{Swann’s Way}, the first volume of Marcel Proust’s \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu}, when encased in the section subtitled “Oscar in Love” (40). The various literary genres Yunior employs lend their unique attributes to strengthen his case against definitive histories.
Yunior seems to favor science fiction, frequently comparing his characters and their experiences to those hailing from the realms of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Twilight Zone* among others, further emphasizing the gulf between actual events and Yunior's retelling. The atmosphere conjured up by works of science fiction and fantasy is most often inspired by encounters with difference (qtd. in Bautista 80). Cast as Sauron, the Witchking of Angmar, and Ring Wraiths, Trujillo and his regime become not only fictional, but also alien and unknowable. However, Yunior also uses references to science fiction in an attempt to bring his history to life, especially when recreating the energy of Santo Domingo during Trujillo's reign for his largely American audience. He compares living in Santo Domingo to

being in that famous *Twilight Zone* episode [...] the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town [...] The white kid is vicious and random and all the people in the 'community' live in straight terror of him, denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat in order not to be the person he maims or, more ominously, sends to the corn. (224)

While he acknowledges that his comparison might cause readers to "roll [their] eyes," he adds that "it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people," asserting that a recourse to science fiction is a viable way to conjure up the essence of that moment in history (224). Monica Hanna champions
this use of "the power of imagination as a disruptive force against the violence" but though it appears that Yunior fills in the gaps for readers of the Western world by providing references to characters from popular novels and television shows, he only replaces the silence of "official" omissions with an alternative silence (505).

Along the same lines, Yunior presents Beli's history as a fairy tale to make it clear that it is only an imaginary approximation of the past. By giving sections of her story titles that allude to fairy tales and fancy, Yunior enriches readers' experiences by providing them with a lens through which to interpret the text, while also reasserting the fictive nature of his recounting. Subtitles such as "Look at the Princess," "Under the Sea," and "El Hollywood" evoke the typical fairy tale tropes, the storyline of the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*, which mirrors Beli's own "Jersey malaise," and the glitz and artificiality of the film world (77). When describing Beli's experiences after her parents died, Yunior writes, "Like a character in one of Oscar's fantasy books, the orphan was sold" (253). And as a character in a fairy tale, Beli obtains "power and a true sense of self" as might one of her fictional counterparts (94). Her transformation from a girl into a woman is "Like the accidental discovery of the One Ring" in *The Lord of the Rings*, and "Like stumbling into the wizard Shazam's cave" in the case of Billy Batson, or like "finding the crashed ship of the Green Lantern" (94). In this fairy tale world, princess Beli becomes the "Queen of Diaspora" (261), and when she is beaten in the canefields,
suffers "About 167 points of damage in total" like a *Dungeons and Dragons* character (147).

But in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Beli is even more than a character from a fairy tale or role playing game; Yunior presents Beli as a text, cleverly conveying her history as little more than a collection of words. After her disappearance as an infant, Beli reappears "As a whisper in La Inca's ear" as a "story" (254), and La Inca "file[s] the paperwork to give the girl an identity," which equates Beli to a pile of official documents (257). And when La Inca attempts to link Beli back to her roots, she "produce[s] an old newspaper, point[s] to a fotograph" and says, "this [...] is who you are" presenting Beli's ties to the past as a mere publication (260). Yunior also reduces Beli's history to text by transforming the beating in the canefields into poetry. Beli as text, within the "stanzas of that wilding," totters on the brink of death, which amounts in this textual world to "the end of language" (147). Afterwards, La Inca also becomes text when she "puts her hands, awkward hyphens, around [Beli]" linking Beli to her history as it unfurls upon the page, pointing to the fact that history takes the form of written records rather than actual events (154).

In addition, Beli presents her own life as a fairy tale, all the while suppressing first her terrible history in Outer Azua and later the entirety of her life before moving to the United States. She does "everything possible to represent her school
as a paradise where she cavort[s] with the other Immortals [...] put[ting] on a show to end all shows” (85), and Yunior marvels at “What a world she spun!” (86). Beli’s rewriting of her experiences effectively rewrites her history as she strives to banish “Casa Hatuey, a history house” in favor of her own house, which is “new and crisp [with] no history at all attached to it” (87). Having “Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination [and] Embraced the Untilles,” Beli “forge[s] herself anew,” which speaks to the malleability of identity while also referring to the suppression of the history of the Dominican Republic by many of its people, crippled by centuries of enforced silence (258-259). Monica Hanna notes that the “negative prefix ‘un-’” of “Untilles” signifies the “condition of forgetfulness” that afflicts the novel’s characters. She also connects the term “forge” with the “forgery” (503) of “Trujillan historiography” (506). To Hanna, Beli’s act of forging herself anew is an “internalization” of the dictator’s version of history, but this forgery relates to the artificiality of both Beli’s personal history and Yunior’s retelling as well (506).

Yunior also fills the novel with silences that represent the fragmentary nature of historical accounts. He develops this theme especially well when telling the story of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral, who has “a reputation for being able to keep his head down during the worst of the regime’s madness – for unseeing, as it were” (215). “Unmatched in maintaining the outward appearance of the enthusiastic Trujillista” and “say[ing] nothing,” Abelard’s mission to hide his feelings and
daughter, along with his inability to act when crippled by the stifling presence of the Trujillo regime, dovetails perfectly with the unknowns that prevent Yunior from being able to provide a complete, accurate history of the de León/Cabral family (215). When considering the potential reasons for Abelard's arrest, Yunior writes, "So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fúku?" (243). On top of the three options above, Yunior mentions a fourth, a "secret history" that contends that Abelard was arrested because he was writing "an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime [...] a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!" (245). This alternative history from an unknown source attributes Abelard's downfall to his version of Trujillo's history, which, in the world of a novel that equates history and fiction, might be deemed "supernatural." Since it follows the phrase "may in some ways," the emphasis of the italicized "true" cannot be meant to establish the common peoples' tales as truthful, but rather suggests the foreignness of the term, that in this context, the word "true" is, in fact, false. To the above question he poses on his readers' behalves regarding the four possibilities for Abelard's arrest, Yunior responds:

The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here [...] 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. (243)

Here the word "monument" takes on a dual significance, acting as both a reminder of the silence that spans generations and a memorial for a past that can never be exhumed. Moreover, Yunior, speaking directly to readers and putting the responsibility to complete the de León/Cabral’s history in their hands, draws them into the active fabrication of the family’s tale.

In this way, Yunior ensures that every reader of the novel will become as much of an “architect of history” as himself and Trujillo (225). Trujillo created his vision of history by imposing silences “through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial,” while Yunior actually captures the essence of the Trujillato effectively by accentuating the silences inherent in his own effort to recreate it (225). But ultimately, there is no definitive history to be found, not on a personal level nor collective. When Yunior writes, “What’s certain is that nothing’s certain,” he negates his own retelling. And however satisfying it may be for a reader to fill in a silence such as the reason for Abelard’s imprisonment, with that act, the past is necessarily dispersed once again. As Lola points out, “Ten million Trujillos is all we are,” each compiling a history as fictional as the rest (324).
Yunior's accounts of Beli and Abelard's experiences are accompanied, more frequently than other sections of the novel, by footnotes detailing the history of the Dominican Republic, which point again to the gap between individual and collective accounts, and attest that Abelard and his family were not the only ones who were forced into silence. In one of the footnotes, Yunior tells of Hatüey, a sixteenth-century Taino chief who canoed from Hispaniola to Cuba to warn his neighbors about the invading Spaniards. Yunior notes that “History [...] has not been kind to Hatüey. Unless something changes ASAP he will go out like his camarada Crazy Horse. Coffled to a beer, in a country not his own,” attributing to history itself this act of forgetting, thereby asserting that history is inherently fragmentary (212). In the nineteenth century, Crazy Horse, a Native American warrior involved in numerous altercations with invading United States troops, such as the Battle of the Hundred in the Hand as well as the Battle of the Little Bighorn, fought fearlessly and inspired his people to the extent that the Sioux remain “the only Indian nation to defeat the United States in war and force it to sign a peace treaty favorable to the red man” (Ambrose 8). As times passes, the stories of leaders like Hatüey and Crazy Horse, who fought to retain control over their homelands, can fade away until their names are more commonly associated with beverages than with bravery. Over and over, Yunior records the experiences of others whose lives are cut short, such as The Mirabal sisters, who were murdered for organizing against Trujillo (83), Rafael Yépez, a schoolteacher who disappeared along with his family after suggesting that
his students might one day become great leaders like Trujillo (97), and Anacaona, a
Taino leader who was hung by the Spanish (244), until it is clear that the de
León/Cabral family is simply caught up in a pattern of oppression that is central to
Yunior's history of the Dominican Republic.

Unlike traditional, textbook histories, Yunior's retelling is not entirely linear;
it is cyclical at times. As "the daughter of the Fall, recipient of its heaviest radiations"
(126), Beli is the embodiment of this cyclical history, the scars on her back "like a
painting of a ciclón" (127). Yunior describes her as "one of those Oyá-souls, always
turning" (79) referring to Oyá, the Yoruba deity of hurricanes (Karade 27). But
despite her power and desire for a house with "no history at all attached to it" Beli
falls victim to the same fate of her ancestors (87). The Gangster, who is also
"grounded by the hurricane winds of history," plays his role in the cycle by taking
advantage of Beli, leading her almost to her death, after which she is forced out of
her country (127). Even though she eventually owns a home and has a family, Beli's
life in the United States still seems like a form of slavery, as she "work[s] her fingers
to the bone" until the very end (137).

All of the main characters in the novel are also caught up in the cycle. While
ostensibly so different from his mother, Oscar ends up reliving her life, encountering
alienation in school, longing to be elsewhere, creating other worlds, and desperately
seeking love. United also by their canefield experiences¹, Oscar and Beli are tied to
the entanglement with Trujillo that resulted in the deaths of Abelard, his wife, Socorro, and their two daughters. Within the novel, the fúku that represents both a curse and the clashing of cultures also functions as a force that binds all of the characters in a repetitive loop of violence and oppression. Oscar’s literal fall from the train bridge and constantly falling in love echoes “Beli’s Fall” from “princesa to mesera” (107), which echoes the chain of Abelard’s misfortunes that Yunior refers to as “the Fall” (235). Yunior is linked to the de León/Cabral fúku as well by “the high school ring, which plowed a nice furrow into [his] cheek” (167) just as the ring of a guard at the Fortaleza San Luis “carved a furrow in [Abelard’s] forehead” (239).

However, Yunior’s connection to the de León/Cabral fúku is not necessarily related to his connection with Oscar and Lola because the curse, carrying the weight of all of the anguish and persecution dating back to “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola,” connects all Dominicans to one another as each generation struggles with the lingering effects of oppression (1). Jennifer Vargas writes of the connection between this “cyclical structure of events in the plot and the residual temporality of dictatorship,” noting that “Oscar astutely recognizes that his life is overdetermined by the long history of colonization, imperialism, and dictatorship in the Americas” (16-17). The fúku reaches out to encompass even those who have fled from their homeland. When Beli describes “how trapped [her generation] felt” she says, “It was like being at the bottom of an ocean […] There was no light and a whole ocean crushing down on you. But most people had gotten so used to it they thought it
normal, they forgot even that there was a world above” using, like Yunior, the ocean, with its endless churning, as a metaphor for the cycle of oppression that continues to submerge the Dominican people (81). He extends this metaphor to the first generation to leave the Dominican Republic, aptly referring to them as “First Wavers. Many waters waiting to become a river” which will inevitably flow out to sea (164). Despite being so “un-Dominican” and born in the United States, Oscar is just as swept up in the spiral of fúku as his ancestors (11).

In fact, since “we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” fúku binds everyone together as we perpetuate the past while forging ahead into the future (2). In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz explains, “For me, though, the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fukú—but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level” (“Junot Díaz”). Yunior goes to great lengths to reveal the constructed nature of history so that his readers will be able to recognize historical accounts as transient, reductive, and questionable, and, thus, begin to break away from the oppressive past by perceiving its effects as they trickle down through the years almost imperceptibly.

At the end of the novel, Yunior confides:

About five years after [Oscar] died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We’re in some kind
of ruined bailey that’s filled to the rim with old dusty books. He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank.

And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling.

Zafa. (325)

The above passage perfectly dramatizes the differences between those whom Derek Walcott refers to as “patricians” and “great poets” (370). For Walcott, patricians are “victims of tradition,” who long for the past (370), whereas great poets, “in their exuberance [...] see everything as renewed” (371). Just as Yunior is caught up in recurring dreams of Oscar, the patricians are swept up in a repetitive loop, an “oceanic nostalgia” like the churning ocean that Yunior employs when describing the Dominican cycle of oppression (Walcott 373). Walcott asserts that patricians are so involved in the past that they experience “a yearning for ruins [and] an imagery of vines ascending broken columns, of dead terraces, of Europe as a nourishing museum,” which mirrors Yunior’s “ruined bailey” full of ancient books (373). Yunior
clings to sentimental memories of Oscar, but within these memories, Oscar "petrifies into myth" becoming one of the fantastic characters in "one of [the] crazy movies" he loved, as history erodes into fiction once again (Walcott 371). Trapped between a past that is just as terrifying to him as it is intriguing, Yunior runs from Oscar, who embodies not only the past, but also Walcott’s great poets, as he gestures to his blank book.

The blank pages are significant for a number of reasons, demonstrating the complexity of Yunior’s postcolonial relationship with history. The blank book could represent an erasure, such as a loss of cultural integrity, dating as far back as the pre-colonial life of the Tainos that was all but obliterated by the Spanish. The blank pages could also represent the fractured nature of history, the unknowns, the unrecorded, and the forgotten. However, the book can also function positively, as a call to action, to rewrite the history of the colonizers, (or, in Yunior’s case, the history of dictators), or to focus on penning the future. Oscar’s “smiling” eyes indicate that he is part of the positive camp, and the placement of “Zafa,” meaning “free,” right after Yunior mentions Oscar’s “smiling” eyes strongly suggests that Oscar is advocating for Walcott’s “Adamic” fresh start, “free” of history. The fact that Yunior italicizes “Zafa” here and nowhere else in the text might be for purposes of emphasis alone, or it may indicate that the word is spoken aloud, especially since, within the novel, speech is never demarcated by quotation marks. However, it is also possible that Yunior, who sometimes “wake[s] up screaming” after these
recurring dreams, interprets the vision as a fúku, as another iteration of the cycle that warrants a zafa (325). Since Yunior is still actively perpetuating history even as he rewrites it, the prospect of leaving the past behind, regardless of the pain it causes, might seem like abandoning a part of himself. Taking the initiative and charging boldly into an unknown future would seem inconsistent with Yunior’s character, given his history of hiding, evasion, and “negligence” (196). But within the complicated, mutable postcolonial tangle of history, all of the above interpretations of Yunior’s dream coexist.

Despite Yunior’s shortcomings, his retelling of Oscar’s life turns out to be wondrous after all, carrying in its pages, Oscar’s message of liberation. Oscar’s death is the beginning of his existence as a “hero” (11). During one of their last meetings, Yunior writes that Oscar “looked like a man at peace with himself [...] wanting to put the past behind him, start a new life. Was trying to decide what he would take with him [...] was trying to pare it all down to what was necessary” (312). Later Yunior adds that Oscar “had gotten some power of his own” (319). While these lines seem cliché, they describe the strength that Oscar derives from letting the pain of the past go in favor of a new start. Of course, it is impossible for Oscar to detach himself from history entirely, so he takes Ybón’s advice and “travel[s] light” (306) on his final voyage, during which he and Ybón begin to give names to their new world, freeing Oscar from the stagnation of a past that involved so much “wait[ing]” by choosing to call it “life” instead (335).
This chapter has examined Yunior’s powerful attempt to place the reins of history in the hands of future generations by revealing the inherently fictional nature of history itself. Through his comparison of contrasting histories, use of multiple genres, and cyclical presentation of history, Yunior helps to dissolve the effects of centuries of brutal persecution initiated by European colonizers, furthered by dictators like Rafael Trujillo, and perpetuated by the oppressed, who continue to engage with the misery of the past. But the blank pages of Yunior’s dreams depict the complexity of his postcolonial relationship with history as they pull him in two opposing directions, entreating him to revisit the past as well as relinquish it. Though Yunior chooses to revise history through his recounting of Oscar’s life, which involves reinscribing the pain of the past, his novel ends as Oscar ventures down the other path, choosing to build a new world upon the ruins of the old.

This kind of genesis would have appealed strongly and come naturally to Oscar, since the creation of other worlds is fundamental to the genres of science fiction and fantasy that he loved. The second chapter of this thesis will explore the connection between these genres and the fluidity of identity.
CHAPTER TWO

WHO MORE SCI-FI THAN US? REIMAGINING IDENTITY

Finding the words to describe postcolonial experiences can pose quite a challenge, even when beginning from Derek Walcott’s celebratory position regarding language. In The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Díaz emphasizes difference, a basic characteristic of the postcolonial experience, by employing what he refers to as “non-English.” For Díaz, writing in “non-English” means fully integrating Spanish words into his primarily English text without italicizing or translating them to prevent privileging one language over another (“Junot Díaz with Sean San Jose”). It also means contrasting Yúniór’s conversational, slang- and expletive-riddled, idiomatic street lingo against Oscar’s crisp, grammatically impeccable English of “a Star Trek computer” (173). Similarly, it means relentlessly bombarding readers with a wide range of subjects, from the animated show “Space Ghost” to the first volume of Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, a tactic that author Rune Graulund labels “inclusion through exclusion,” as Díaz’s esoteric references ensure that no one group of people will be able to claim “mastery” over the text, thereby celebrating difference (37). Díaz also uses the languages of science fiction and fantasy as especially effective tools for expressing difference, since these genres involve alien encounters and otherworldly experiences.

Science fiction and fantasy also resonate with Díaz’s portrayal of the postcolonial experience for a number of other reasons. Since their inception in novel
form, generally believed to coincide with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, science fiction and fantasy have grown in popularity as today's audiences around the world embrace the franchises of George Lucas' *Star Wars* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, as well as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (Tymn 42). But historically, science fiction and fantasy have been marginalized genres, sharing with postcolonialism the experience of having been "exiled," trivialized and excluded from mainstream readership and academia alike (Tymn 41). These genres are also ideal for examining postcolonialism since they often feature as well as function as a means of escape. Through engaging with stories that take place on other planets or in alternate realities, readers of science fiction and fantasy can break away from the repetition of everyday life, just as Yunior aims to free himself and others from the cyclical entanglement with history that characterizes his Dominican-American experience. Moreover, as critic Marshall Tymn writes, science fiction and fantasy "prepare us to accept change, to view change as both natural and inevitable" (41), and "foster the idea that mankind might learn to control its own destiny," both of which would appeal to Díaz, who urges his readers to accept the changes that resulted from colonialism and effect change themselves, thereby taking control of their lives and becoming the people they want to be (42). To present these postcolonial concepts in a refreshing, creative way, Díaz finds in science fiction a
perfect vehicle, since it is a “form of contemporary metaphor, a literary device for examining our world and our lives from another perspective” (Tymn 48).

Many scholars have examined the role of science fiction and fantasy in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Henry Wessells believes that “all the genre allusions in Oscar’s life and death are so many bars of a freak-show cage in which Oscar is put on display” (qtd. in Bautista 42). Monica Hanna asserts that they read as a kind of foreign language that immerses readers in an immigrant experience (514). Dan Hartland thinks that their main function is to cast Oscar as an outsider. Tim Lanzendorfer feels that Oscar’s love of “Western Fantasy” actually connects him to the “Dominican marvelous reality” of his ancestors (138). Others, like Daniel Bautista, attest that Díaz’s references to science fiction and fantasy warrant a place within those genres. Bautista has coined the term “comic book realism” in an effort to categorize *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (42). But to relegate the novel to any one genre, however amalgamated, is to mistreat a masterpiece that resists categorization, to put a stop to the buzzing, evolving fluidity of a text whose message resides within its irresolution since it mirrors the fluctuations, inconsistencies, and complexity of identity. While Díaz skillfully employs elements of science fiction and fantasy for many purposes, this chapter will explore his use of those genres in order to depict the transience and arbitrary nature of identity, as he fleshes out the intricate network of experiences and influences that comprise Oscar’s character. Portrayed through the lenses of science fiction and fantasy, such a fluidity of identity
dovetails nicely with Walcott’s “Adamic” vision of man as “elemental” (370), which connects identity not only to beginnings through its relationship with the word “elementary,” but also to mythological personifications of the elements dating back to Græco-Roman mythology and popularized by the sixteenth-century writings of Paracelsus (Latimer 690). There is a strong connection between mythology and science fiction since both encourage the creativity and open-mindedness that are imperative when straddling worlds or crossing borders.

In the world of the novel, cultural identity, science fiction, and fantasy are bound together by their connection with difference. Yunior, the narrator for the majority of the novel, speculates that Oscar’s love of science fiction and fantasy

[...] might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey – a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries [...] or was it something deeper, something ancestral? Who can say?

(21-22)

A clash of cultures lies in each of these possibilities, first in European conquest, then in diaspora, and finally in the fuku implied by the reference to “something ancestral,” but Yunior offers no definitive answer, preferring to promote the open-endedness that is so central to the novel. In another example where cultural identity
and science fiction and fantasy intersect, Yunior asserts that Oscar's designation as the neighborhood parigüayo, a corruption of the English neologism "party watcher," leads him to "another Watcher, the one who lamps on the Blue Side of the Moon" (19-20), referring to an extraterrestrial comic book character, who sits alone on the moon, observing the Earth from afar (Uatu). Like the Watcher, Oscar is defined by the fact that he is different, set apart in a world of his own, always outside looking in.

Yunior plays up this cosmic representation of cultural identity by using science fiction and fantasy references to portray Oscar's connections to and interactions with others. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao begins with the creation of fuku, "uttered just as one world perished and another began" (1). This chain of cultures colliding runs through the whole novel, but it is especially prevalent in the chapters about Oscar as he struggles to negotiate between the worlds of the Dominican Republic and the United States. Yunior likens the shift from Third to First world to an experience on par with space and time travel (22). Being "out in the world" (33) becomes a metaphor for being a normal Dominican boy, but Oscar is so desperate to stay inside that he hides in a closet, risking his mother's wrath (21). When it comes to relationships with women, which, in the world of the novel, are also linked to being a Dominican male, Oscar builds a "secret cosmology" that evokes images of Oscar orbiting various planets, each representing a woman who is light years away from him (36). Yunior describes Oscar's attempts to talk to
women as his "Battle of the Planets routine," which refers stylistically to an Anime show, but also conjures up an image of the clashing of worlds as Oscar desperately tries to bridge the gap between himself and others (183). Yunior even describes Oscar's obesity, which is considered "un-Dominican," as the "evil planet Gordo" (271). In all of the above examples, these worlds and planets provide readers with a visual representation of the cultural significance of Oscar's everyday interactions and experiences, and the way they affect his identity. Against this cosmic backdrop, the cultural yardstick by which Yunior measures Oscar's behaviors and inclinations becomes trivial by contrast.

Oscar's inability to blend in and embody Dominican "male-itude" spirals into an obsession with the end of the world that is crucial to the development of his identity within the scope of the novel (283). Fueled by the post-apocalyptic, science fiction works of John Wyndham and John Christopher (23), and films like Zardoz and Virus (33), Oscar seeks out worlds in crisis, worlds that are in transition, because he himself suffers from periods of "crisis" (268). In his essay "Crises of Alterity," Sanford Budick notes that crisis, as "the urgent need to encounter otherness," can function in a "self-transformative aspect" (5). Thus, these apocalyptic scenarios, while seemingly bleak, also represent Oscar's interactions with otherness and signify space for beginnings, for the change that Oscar seeks and to which he is constantly subjected. During these crises, he often dreams of "wandering around the evil planet Gordo [...] encountering [...] burned-out ruins, each seething with new
debilitating forms of radiation” (268). Though "debilitating," this radiation is nonetheless transformative. And in the world of comic books, radiation often endows characters with their super-human powers, as in the case of The Incredible Hulk, Spiderman, and the Fantastic Four. While painful, Oscar's crises invariably result in a “feeling of love in his heart” as he builds a new self upon the ruins of the old, mirroring Walcott's celebratory generation of new worlds (269). The frequency with which Oscar engages with these end-of-the-world episodes both through his love of science fiction and fantasy and his failed romances demonstrates how continually his identity is being transformed through the push and pull of the cultural worlds he spans.

In chapter one of the novel, Yunior begins by describing Oscar's overnight transition from a "'normal' Dominican boy (1) to a "sci-fi-reading nerd," laying the groundwork for a novel that explores the transience of identity (19). One day Oscar is a "little Porfirio Rubirosa [...] the quintessential jet-setting car-racing polo-obsessed playboy [...] the original Dominican player" (12) and the next, "a social introvert who trembled with fear in gym class and watched nerd British shows like Dr. Who and Blake's 7, and could tell you the difference between a Veritech fighter and a Zentraedi walker, and used a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like indefatigable and ubiquitous" (22). While it may seem that the first description is very specific since it refers to Porfirio Rubirosa, an individual, the second description of Oscar as "a social introvert" is more specific due to the level of detail
that follows. Though at times excessive, this level of specificity is at the heart of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao since these details preserve the individuality of Yunior’s tale. In the first description, the words “quintessential” and “original” liken Oscar to a Dominican prototype that is the product of stripping away all unique characteristics. Yunior's persistent use of science fiction and fantasy references like "Veritech fighter and Zentraedi walker" is especially effective for two reasons. First, readers are less likely to recognize these references since science fiction and fantasy are not mainstream genres, which will help to impress upon them the differences that Yunior aims to accentuate. Secondly, since these science fiction and fantasy references are imaginary in nature, they add a level of complexity to the vision of identity formation that emerges from the text. The above descriptions make it clear that Oscar’s transformation is not only sudden, but also extreme, as Oscar evolves from a budding, hypersexual man-about-town into a shut-in who obsesses over television shows featuring interstellar freedom fighters, time-traveling aliens armed with screwdrivers, and animated, robotic weaponry. These two descriptions of Oscar fall on opposite ends of the personality spectrum, which demonstrates the vast array of traits and ideals that can comprise the identity of an individual at any given time as well as the mutability and fluidity of identity.

These sudden changes in Oscar's character are only the beginning of the rollercoaster ride of his "wondrous" life, as he rises, buoyed up on his hopes of becoming a typical Dominican male, and then plummets in a series of "falls" that
almost end in death (200, 263). His “normal” Dominican childhood gives way to his “GhettoNerd” phase (1), which is uplifted by his love of Ana, after which he dips into Rutgers, where he soars when he meets Jenni, before jumping off the New Brunswick train bridge (191) into a life of “Torture” (263), teaching at the high school he hated, before taking off on his “Final Voyage” with Ybón (315). While Yunior depicts the ups and downs of Oscar’s identity crises, he also uses the word “fall” each time Oscar falls in love, so that every peak and valley of Oscar’s progression is, in fact, a fall, whether it leads him towards or away from Dominican “male-itude” (36, 182, 279). This constant “falling” gestures back to the nature of the apocalyptic identity crises that Oscar experiences, since, as Budick states, “crisis involves a sense of imminent or immediate loss. It also entails a painful sorting out among the elements of what we consider to be reality” (5). Though Oscar’s sense of reality might be comically skewed, he nonetheless loses parts of his persona even as he gains others while navigating the worlds of his crushes, as evidenced by his “los[ing] interest in the final issues of Watchmen” when inching towards Dominican “normality” through his entanglement with Ana (45) and blasting off in “his rocketship, the Hijo de Sacrificio,” when involved with Ybón (291). Hence, Oscar’s many “falls” illustrate the ceaseless evolution of his identity.

Unable to fit neatly within the worlds of Dominicans and Americans alike, Oscar hovers somewhere between “real” and imaginary worlds, so deeply involved in his books, games, and writings that he adopts the “cultural” characteristics of
these fictional realms as his own. He “could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee,” all of which Yunior links to Oscar’s ethnicity by attesting that “In these pursuits alone Oscar showed the genius his grandmother insisted was part of the family patrimony” (21). As Yunior depicts the widening of the rift between Oscar and his peers as the years go by, it becomes clear that Oscar has withdrawn into the world that he has built through his connection with his books and movies. Concealed from his classmates at Don Bosco Tech by his DM’s screen, Oscar is literally surrounded by text, by the ground rules of a fictional universe (23). It is clear that words have, in fact, become his world. Hence, Oscar naturally speaks the language of science fiction and fantasy, using it constantly even though it proves unintelligible to most, such as when Oscar approaches a girl on a bus and says, “If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen Charisma,” imparting a compliment apparent only to Dungeons and Dragons enthusiasts (174).

Oscar’s love of Dungeons and Dragons, a role-playing game, is also an important part of the novel’s exploration of identity. Players perform as fantastic characters, whose attributes, such as strength, intelligence, and charisma, are randomly determined by the rolling of dice. This randomness, which often applies not only to the creation of individual characters, but also to the outcome of events and effectiveness of attacks or defense during combat, mirrors the arbitrary nature of identity formation. But as in real life, within which history, society, and
encounters with others provide structure, this arbitrariness is curbed by the ground rules of the game and by certain parameters such as the limits imposed by the numbers on dice. While the references to Dungeons and Dragons lend substance to Oscar’s nerdiness, they also provide a detailed representation of cultural interactions and identity formation since the game involves characters, incorporates random chance, and remains open-ended.

Like his friends Al and Miggs, Oscar also creates characters and performs parts, but, as a Dungeon Master, his DM screen conceals his attributes from the other players, mimicking the unknowability of the other. The performance aspect of Dungeons and Dragons is worth noting because it gestures to the performances taking place every day and the roles that individuals play when presenting themselves to others. As Michel de Montaigne points out, “there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others” (qtd. in Budick 20). Yunior also touches on this by noting not only Oscar’s “hiding himself in the upstairs closet (22) and hiding out in the library, but also by admitting to his, Yunior’s, own ability to “hide his otakuness,” (his love of science fiction and fantasy), by presenting himself as the hypersexual, macho Dominican player that he wants the world to see (21). Similarly, Ana Obregon is “impossible to know” (35) since her “hidden Ana” switches between two masks depending upon the occasion (34).

As a Dungeon Master, Oscar designs and controls the worlds that the adventurers explore, such as “his famous Aftermath! campaign [featuring] the
postapocalyptic ruins of virus-wracked America” which allows Oscar to play out in
this fantastic setting the constructing and reconstructing of worlds (28). It is clear
that his love of generating these realms draws him to this leading role, since he is
appalled when Magic Cards take the nerd world by storm, when there are “no more
characters or campaigns” and “all the narrative [is] flensed from the game, all the
performance” (269). When Miggs comments on Oscar’s dashed hopes of “turn[ing]
into the next Gary Gygax,” Oscar is so devastated that he uncharacteristically
responds by punching Miggs in the face (46). This reaction is so strong that it
suggests that Oscar’s connection to the game has moved beyond mere
entertainment. Even though Yunior asserts that “playing Villains and Vigilantes,” a
role-playing game, is the only alternative to “the Higher Power’s last-ditch attempt
to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude” (283), it seems that
these role-playing games are more than just a representation of Oscar’s American
persona. In a sense, these games act as a zafa, as an escape from the fuku produced
and reinforced by the history that binds Oscar to his “cursed” relations, for the
worlds that Oscar creates as a Dungeon Master are completely under his control and
allow him to generate characters that are unfettered by an existing history. In fact,
he can even create the history of his fantastic worlds. Yunior picks up on this
element of control, gesturing to Oscar’s God-like, though random, powers of
creation, by repeatedly mentioning d10s, which look very much like “dios” in the
font that is used in the novel (28, 100, 191).
When, in isolation, Oscar can no longer be a Dungeon Master, he turns to writing works of science fiction and fantasy, another way of creating and controlling worlds. While this might seem like nothing more than another nerdy impulse that ties Oscar to his American taste for the more “speculative genres” (43), his writings also connect him to his grandfather, Abelard, who may have been murdered for writing “an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime,” a book that attested that Trujillo was “a creature from another world” (245). Moreover, Yunior asserts that “In Santo Domingo a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow” (245-246). Therefore, Oscar’s science fiction and fantasy novels are an expression of both the Dominican and American influences that form his unique identity. As befits The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, a novel that resists all resolution and centers on the endless fashioning and refashioning of the self, Oscar’s space opera, Starscourge, is “never-to-be-completed” and his last book, containing the “Cosmo DNA,” is lost somewhere between the United States and the Dominican Republic (333). Oscar also aspires to be the “Dominican Tolkien” which is appropriate since Tolkien, the well-known author of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, is most acclaimed for the detailed and comprehensive nature of the world he created within his works (192). His novels feature extensive descriptions of the cultures he created, along with complete languages of his own invention. Tolkien’s Silmarillion, a posthumous prelude to The Lord of the Rings that is described on its back cover as “The Story of the Creation of the World,” provides the history of the
characters that fill Tolkien's other works. It is so detailed that it contains
genealogies and indexes, some of which include pronunciation guides and
translations for the languages of the imaginary worlds in his novels. Oscar’s desire
to follow in Tolkien's footsteps by creating cultures speaks to the connection
between fantasy and identity, as well as the power of writing.

The connection between words and worlds is a theme that runs through the
whole of Oscar, beginning with the supernatural impact of the word “fukú,” which is
“uttered just as one world perished and another began” and has the power to “invite
calamity on the heads of you and yours,” to have a physical effect upon the world
(1). Similarly, the word “zafa” is “the only one surefire counterspell that would keep
you and your family safe” (7). Yunior refers to his novel as a zafa, as a repository of
words that have the power to offset the fukú story “that’s got its fingers around [his]
throat,” that has had such a profound effect upon his identity that it has caused him
to become, not merely a changed man, but a “new man” (326). The connection
between languages and worlds also appears when Oscar and Ana create “their
landscape” by “building another one of their word-scrapers” (36). This strongly
resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa’s assertion that “ethnic identity is twin skin to
linguistic identity,” confirming that Oscar’s identity, being “twin skin” to the
language of science fiction and fantasy that he employs, must be similarly comprised
(59). Though the word “wondrous” in the title of the novel is often seen as little
more than an allusion to Hemingway’s short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis
Macomber” (“Junot Díaz”), or interpreted sarcastically, applied as it is to a life that could hardly be described as “marvelous” or “wonderful,” it also refers to the nature of Oscar’s identity, since “wondrous” is derived from the term “wonder,” which can be defined as “an extraordinary natural occurrence, esp. when regarded as supernatural” (OED).

For within the world of the novel, it becomes clear that cultural identity is a fictional construct, derived, in Oscar’s case, from his love of make-believe societies and characters. This is surely what Oscar is getting at when he tells Gorilla Grod and Solomon Grundy, “anything you can dream [...] you can be” (322). All of the characters in the novel are struggling to negotiate between the cultural worlds clashing within them, but Oscar, after his final voyage, finds power by giving up the fight and embracing the worlds he has imbibed, acknowledging them as self rather than other. After describing a dream scenario, which involves escaping from Beli, who represents her daughter, Lola’s, cultural ties to the Dominican Republic, Lola echoes Oscar’s conclusion when she states, “you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (209). The only way for Lola to escape the clash of cultures that torments her is to recognize them as the forces that continually reinvent her, and therefore, are her.

In an interview, Junot Díaz explains that The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao “argues that the real is fantastic” (Barrios). Yunior makes this clear before his recounting of Oscar’s tale even begins when he writes, “I’m not entirely sure Oscar
would have liked this designation. Fuku story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (6). Critics often use this quote to show that science fiction and fantasy can be used as lenses for understanding diaspora (Hanna 514, Lazendorfer 139) or the “outsized reality” of Latin America à la Garcia Marquez (Bautista 43). However, a more literal interpretation reveals the connection among Santo Domingo, the Antilles, and the nature of the genres themselves. Since “the real is fantastic” in the world of the novel, Santo Domingo is sci-fi, and the Antilles are fantasy. Though science fiction and fantasy indisputably serve as lenses through which readers engage with the text, they are the most appropriate means of transmitting the fanciful nature of reality not only because of the way that they are applied by Yunior, but also because they are recognizably fictional. Their marginality as genres ensures that readers will be less likely to accept them at face value, but it is the otherworldly and inventive subject matter that so effectively stamps them as supernatural, making them the perfect tool for Yunior as he crafts his vision of the real as fantastic.

When Oscar asks, “What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” he acknowledges the fantastic nature of his native land and, therefore, his cultural identity (6). Moreover, Oscar recognizes that his cultural background is rooted in the individual stories of a people, “the kind of story we were all living in” (6). T. S. Miller misinterprets this quote, believing that
Yunior perforce allows for the possibility that not everyone may find sf [sic] the appropriate metaphor to describe his or her experience of New York City. Thus, Yunior understands his own science-fictional lens as somehow "local," perhaps in the Lyotardian sense, rather than universally applicable and all-embracing, while Oscar’s way of understanding the world essentially ascribes “master narrative” status to the single lens of [science fiction].

Nothing could be further from Oscar’s beliefs since “the kind of story we were all living in” extends to encompass “all,” referring again, not only to Oscar’s reality, but also to the fantastic nature of reality in general. In contrast, Yunior’s designation “fukú story” reduces the events of Oscar’s life to the result of an ancestral force that dictates the lives of the novel’s characters, to the menace of a stifling entity “that’s got its fingers around [Yunior’s] throat.” Linked as it is to the “arrival of Europeans” and Trujillo, Yunior’s “fukú story” is the one that harkens back to a master narrative (1).

Thus, in response, Yunior writes his novel, his very own “zafa of sorts,” full of the minute details and obscure science fiction and fantasy references that offset the status quo and gesture to the fluidity of culture and identity (7). Since Yunior often compares Trujillo and his regime to characters from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Tim Lanzendorfer asserts that “it is possible to read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as the very book that depicts Trujillo’s supernatural origins, the “Lost Final
Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral“ (135). But Yunior’s novel seems to have more in common with Oscar’s “cure to what ails us, […] The Cosmo DNA,” which, judging from its title, must have contained Oscar’s conclusions about cultural identity since it refers to a universal genetic scheme, and, judging from its author, must have been rooted in science fiction and fantasy. Yunior hopes that Isis will compile texts like these and “put an end to it,” but he is haunted by Oscar’s emphatic circling of the words “nothing ever ends” in his copy of Watchmen during his final voyage (331). There is a dual significance to these words: Yunior fears that “nothing ever ends” means that the cycle of oppression, of being “fukú’d,” will never end, whereas Oscar optimistically interprets these words to mean that change is not only possible, but also inevitable and constant (270).

The model of cultural identity that infuses The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao seems to take a page from Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, in which she writes, “Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travesía, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again […] I am no longer the same person I was before” (48). Yunior and Oscar undoubtedly would have appreciated Anzaldúa’s use of the word “alien” to depict the development of her identity as both a mestiza and an extraterrestrial, paving the way for a novel in which identity and fantasy are virtually interchangeable.

Thus freed of the restraints of history and arbitrary restrictions imposed by cultural and social structures, the self becomes a new frontier in which all things are
possible, the Eden of which Walcott writes. Like the “blank pages” of history discussed in chapter one of this thesis, the “Man Without a Face” that Yunior and the de León/Cabral family repeatedly encounter is as haunting as he is liberating (321). Yunior, who is troubled by the past, finds the “No Face Man” threatening because he views him as a representation of absence, as the features of a people that have been swept away by the tides of oppression (330). For Walcott, the erasure of the features of his ancestors reduces them to mere men, none of whom is superior to the other; erasure means putting aside judgments and explanations. (373). Thus, the “No Face Man” also can be seen as an opportunity to start anew, to craft an identity free of precedents and standards.

However, shaking off centuries of history and culture in order to generate such an identity seems an overly ambitious, if not impossible, task. Here science fiction and fantasy provide a possible pathway, since they celebrate exploring new horizons and the power of imagination, both of which are crucial to Yunior’s vision of receptivity and reinventing the self. In an essay on the effects of the fairy tale, J.R.R Tolkien writes of the reader’s experience when returning to “reality” after having engaged in the fantastic world of a text:

Recovery is re-gaining – regaining of a clear view... We need to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness. Of all faces those of our familiares are the ones most difficult to see with fresh
attention, perceiving their likeness and unlikeness: that they are faces, and yet unique faces. (qtd. in Fredericks 38-39)

Through immersion in the unfamiliar worlds of these genres, readers acquire imaginative resources for exploring the worlds within and around them. Touching upon "freeing" readers and the features of "faces," Tolkien's words resonate strikingly with the themes of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, while also confirming the efficacy of science fiction and fantasy as tools for conveying the postcolonial experience.
CONCLUSION

Over the course of its examination of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* this thesis has championed throwing off the shackles of history and socially-constructed constraints of culture in order to start afresh, celebrating all that is different, and sometimes conflicting, within the self.

However, over five hundred years after postcolonialism irreversibly altered the course of Hispaniola’s history, it seems that Junot Díaz’s revival of the past has become necessary. Though reliving the pain that accompanies the history of colonialism can lead to stagnation or reversion, it appears even worse to forget, to be blind to the forces that form the self and affect everyday interactions with others. So while it is important to leave the pain behind, it is imperative to remain selectively aware of the formative role of history, to move forward, not in the utter innocence of a first Eden, which could resemble a destructive and futile longing to return to a pre-colonial state, but guided instead by a past that takes the shape of wisdom. As Derek Walcott writes, “the apples of [a] second Eden have the tartness of experience” (372). It is inspiring to see that the effects of postcolonialism can be very fruitful when channeled into brilliant works like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.*

Chapter one of this thesis surveyed the many ways that Yunior gestures to the constructed nature of history. It examined the disparities that emerge as Yunior
compares different versions of historical events, the discrepancies that mar his own recounting, and the fantastic genres that he uses to transform history into a glorified fairy tale. It also highlighted the silences that prevent historical accounts from ever being complete representations of the past, and described the ways that Yunior involves readers in the act of creating fictional histories by forcing them to fill in the unknowns and omissions that the telling of Oscar's tale uncovers. All of the above tactics combine to divest history of its factuality, thereby wiping the slate clean and allowing for a new history powered by imagination.

Chapter two looked at Yunior's application of science fiction as a means of exploring the fluidity of identity. It began by describing Yunior's planetary model of cultural collisions, which provides readers with a larger-than-life visual representation of cultural interactions. It then investigated the ways that Oscar over the course of his life becomes the product of the fantastic worlds he engages with through his love of science fiction and fantasy comics, novels, movies and games. Oscar's embodiment of these fictional worlds demonstrates the boundlessness of his identity. Released of all terrestrial restraints at the end of his life, he declares: "anything you can dream you can be" (322). Since the novel is full of apocalypses, it gives way to Derek Walcott's genesis, to new worlds full of promise.

The critical discourse inspired by the historical themes within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* focuses for the most part on the dictatorship of Rafael
Trujillo rather than the colonialism of which he is a representative or, as Yunior puts it, “hypeman of sorts” (2). Only a couple of insightful articles by Jose David Saldivar and Jennifer Vargas deeply explore the postcolonial themes within the novel, and both present the past as a battlefield upon which Díaz and his contemporaries must fight against imperialism and injustice. Saldivar argues that Díaz “reinscribes the erased history” of “forgotten colonialism and imperialism” in order to bring the periphery to the forefront (134). To Saldivar, Oscar’s “blank pages” represent scandalous cover-ups and exclusion (133). While Vargas more optimistically points to Díaz’s ability to open “a dialogue about how to rebuild,” she also asserts that he must step into the role of a dictator to do so (26). This thesis attempts to extract from the novel the possibility of a path to resistance that does not involve fighting or incriminating oneself. While the positive message that runs through this effort may run the risk of appearing to attenuate the atrocities that resulted from colonialism by portraying them as events that lead to a more diverse and, therefore, vibrant global culture, that is not its intent. Much has been written about and initiated by the misery associated with the violent and oppressive past; this thesis aims to offer instead an opportunity to redirect the persistent socioeconomical effects of colonialism into productive and potentially therapeutic ventures.

Though it is not within the scope of this thesis, a more rigorous exploration of the relationship between postcolonialism and science fiction might provide a positive outlet. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*
(2004), a collection of stories by diverse writers edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, might be an ideal place to start, though other sources have been cropping up recently, such as Eric D. Smith’s *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (2012), which begins by discussing the implications of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. A study of this kind might overlap in places with Afropurism, an aesthetic that author Ytasha Womack describes in her book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (Womack). These exciting new approaches to conceptualizing history and celebrating the self affirm Walcott’s belief that we are all “capable of enormous wonder” (371).
NOTES

1. Yunior attests that the Mirabal sisters were also 'beaten in a cane field' (157).

2. Yunior also refers to "the sexy isthmus of [Beli's] waist" depicting her waist as a strip of land with water on either side connecting two larger areas of land. As the "Queen of Diaspora," she is a land mass, comprised of two countries, surrounded by ocean, and, hence, submerged like her compatriots.

3. *Battle of the Planets* (1978-1985) was one of the first American overdubbed adaptations of a Japanese animated television show (Green 28). It featured the cheesy, fast-paced voiceovers that are still associated with Anime today.

4. *Aftermath!* is a role-playing game that was first published in 1981. Many different versions have been released since then, but all of them take place in a post-apocalyptic setting.


---. "Junot Díaz with Campo Santo’s Sean San Jose." Jewish Community Center, San Francisco, CA. 16 September 2013. Interview.


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