

“Nothing ever ends”: Archives of Written  
and Graphic Testimony in  
*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*  
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**Abstract:** This article reads *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as a critique of metatestimonial fiction and of the tendency to overstate literature’s power to heal cultural traumas. *Metatestimonio* bears figurative witness to historical atrocities and interrogates who is or is not allowed to speak of such events. Although Junot Díaz’s narrator Yúnior gathers testimony from multiple survivors of the Trujillo regime, he mediates their experiences through his own authorial voice. The novel suggests that in refusing to allow testimony to speak for itself, Yúnior (and by extension *metatestimonio* as a genre) replicates the discursive practices of the regime it denounces. Furthermore, by referencing specific comic book series, the artwork accompanying the 2007 Riverhead edition of the novel generates a counter-narrative critiquing Yúnior’s project. This graphic counter-narrative illustrates that ending the Trujillato’s hold on Dominicans is impossible—that certain traumas cannot be healed once and for all. *Oscar Wao* thus suggests that in claiming literature’s power to heal the past, we (like Yúnior) privilege our own desire for resolution over the lived realities of survivors, for whom the working through of trauma is an ongoing and incomplete process.

**Keywords:** testimony, trauma, Dominican Republic, comic books, Caribbean literature

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“I like human endings,” says Junot Díaz. “For me, human endings are ones that represent the full complexity of what I con-

sider human experience. For me, the consequences of surviving sometimes give you great pause.”

Ruby Cutolo, “Guns and Roses”

Fifty years after the assassination of the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, officials in Santo Domingo opened the Museo Memorial de la Resistencia Dominicana (Memorial Museum of the Dominican Resistance). On its website, the museum is described as “un recinto para conmemorar a los caídos en las luchas democráticas” [“a site commemorating those fallen in the democratic struggles”].<sup>1</sup> There are many such fallen; official estimates suggest that at least twenty thousand people died at the hands of the Trujillo regime’s operatives.<sup>2</sup> In its effort to honor these caídos, the museum makes evidence of their lived experiences accessible to the public. Exhibits include video testimonials from survivors and thousands of documents detailing the regime’s activities—even, devastatingly, photographs of victims seated in Trujillo’s infamous “tronos” (thrones), or electric chairs. The museum likewise catalogues Sitios de Memoria (Sites of Memory) throughout the Dominican Republic, where heroes such as the Mirabal sisters lived and died, and offers visitors the opportunity to add new names to the lists of murdered, disappeared, imprisoned, and tortured.<sup>3</sup>

Like other institutions dedicated to preserving histories of atrocity, the museum’s engagement with the past is future-oriented, intended so that the nation can move forward—as evidenced by its NUNCA MAS (Never Again) project, which calls for the creation of a Truth Commission to investigate the human rights abuses committed by the Trujillato so that such crimes will not be repeated. Significantly, the project labels the regime “aberrante” [“aberrant”], perhaps in an effort to construct it as a cultural trauma “outside the range” of normative human experience (Brown 100). While the psychological motivations for considering the Trujillato “aberrante” are understandable, this construction has problematic implications. In labeling the regime non-normative, the NUNCA MAS project risks ignoring the long-standing historical and political forces that made the Trujillato possible and that still affect life

in the Dominican Republic. Current events force us to ask ourselves, for instance, whether the Trujillato’s violent anti-Hatianismo was indeed an aberration, or whether it was (and is) more normative in the Dominican Republic than the museum’s founders would like to admit.<sup>4</sup> By distancing the rest of Dominican society from Trujillo, the museum draws a hard line between victims and perpetrators, thus side-stepping such difficult questions of social complicity.

In the wake of the Museo Memorial’s opening, the dictator’s grandson, Ramfis Domínguez-Trujillo, announced plans for a virtual Museo Generalísimo Trujillo (General Trujillo Museum), which takes a very different approach to the dictator’s historical legacy. While Domínguez-Trujillo acknowledges that his grandfather was a dictator, his museum emphasizes how Dominican society still benefits from Trujillo’s rule. He argues that “his grandfather’s efforts to modernize the Dominican Republic . . . are overlooked in favor of his ‘excesses,’” and he seeks to “tap a quiet undercurrent of nostalgia for Trujillo” (Archibold).<sup>5</sup> This museum shares the Museo Memorial’s interest in bringing the nation’s history to bear on its present and its future—yet instead of drawing a hard line between the Trujillato and the rest of Dominican society, Domínguez-Trujillo’s project suggests the unsettling links between the dictator and contemporary Dominican ideology. While the Museo Generalísimo’s sanitizing of the dictator’s legacy has kept it from gaining as much influence over public memory as the Museo Memorial, both museums are engaged in an ongoing negotiation of national identity that has characterized Dominican life for the past half-century.

Such negotiations are what Lauren Derby, in *The Dictator’s Seduction* (2009), labels “face work.”<sup>6</sup> She claims that face work was a by-product of the Trujillato:

it was close to impossible to cast oneself as an honorable subject resisting Trujillo and his depredations; a political subject was then forced to resort to face-saving strategies when a gaping abyss opened between the self one wished to be and the one he or she had become. For some this created a kind of split identity, a gap between one’s self and person, one’s view of one-

self and one's public face, one's past and one's present, that took much face work to reconcile. (Derby 11)

As the rhetorical maneuverings of the two museums indicate, a similar kind of face work has also come to characterize Dominican public life post-Trujillo as the nation attempts to reconcile what it became under the Trujillato with its current self-image and with the kind of nation it would like to be in the future.

Literature about the regime—produced both on the island and in diaspora—has been an integral part of this ongoing face work. Indeed, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Roy C. Boland Osegueda suggest, “the continued production and global circulation of literary narratives about Trujillo have served the function of constructing his thirty-one years in power as a cultural trauma” (3). These literary narratives often take the form of *metatestimonio*, a term I borrow from Nereida Segura-Rico. According to Segura-Rico, *metatestimonio* novels echo *testimonio*'s desire to voice victims' experiences. However, the genre is also deeply concerned with “the illocutionary aspects of the testimonial, that is . . . the issue of who talks and for whom. . . . This function allows these texts to call attention to their own status as fictions while at the same time blurring the division between fiction and reality” (175–76). Segura-Rico includes two distinct subgenres of literature within the category of *metatestimonio*: the testimonial novel and the *novela del dictador* (dictator novel). As its name suggests, the testimonial novel is told from the perspective of victims (real or imagined). Conversely, the *novela del dictador* focuses on the corrupt inner workings of regimes. Segura-Rico suggests that both forms grant “the novel a special status in uncovering hidden truths” about the past, although the testimonial novel is also likely to grant literature “the power to straighten the wrongs of history, to heal the wounds of the past by the sheer force of a creative will” (181). Unsurprisingly, the violent excesses of the Trujillato have inspired *metatestimonio* novels in both veins.<sup>7</sup>

While Junot Díaz's Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) has typically been considered exemplary of another Latin American literary form—magical realism—this text also fits

within the *metatestimonio* tradition.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have often focused on the seemingly magical nature of *fukú*, or what the novel’s narrator, Yunior, describes as “the curse and Doom of the New World” (1). He explains, “it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (1). Yunior claims that Trujillo was *fukú*’s “high priest”: “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (2–3; emphasis in original). Whatever the case—Trujillo and *fukú*, or Trujillo *as fukú*—the curse dominates the life of Yunior’s college roommate, “nerdboy” Oscar “Wao” de León, who is raised in New Jersey in the decades after Trujillo’s death.

As Yunior’s description suggests, *fukú* as it is perceived among Dominicans is decidedly supernatural in nature. Derby encountered Dominican respondents who described *fukú* as both a superhuman aura that surrounded Trujillo, and as “an evil charge passed through bodily extensions such as clothing, house, touch, or even the uttering of one’s name” (217). Yunior’s and Derby’s descriptions, taken together, suggest that *fukú* moves both synchronically and diachronically—through populations and through time. As a phenomenon, *fukú* thus causes distinct traumas (such as the arrival of Columbus or the Perejil Massacre) and renders those traumas transgenerational and transnational—extending their effects through time and space so that they affect diasporic individuals like Oscar and Yunior.

Although Oscar ultimately loses his life to *fukú*, Yunior’s stated goal is to construct a *zafa* or “counterspell” to protect Oscar’s surviving family members (*Oscar Wao* 7). This *zafa* takes the form of a meticulous retelling of Oscar’s life and his family’s history. If *fukú* is trauma, then Yunior’s *zafa* is a form of testimony—his attempt to assert the reality of the horrors perpetrated by Trujillo and the reality of their after-effects. In constructing this *zafa*-testimony, Yunior engages in what trauma theorists call narrativization: the conversion of fragments of experience and memory into a (more or less) cohesive narrative, allowing the traumatic event to be integrated into the psyche and worked through successfully.<sup>9</sup> Yunior wants his *zafa* narrative to produce healing, allowing a better

future to emerge for Oscar's family; he hopes Oscar's niece Isis will take his work to "add her own insights and she'll put an end to it [fukú]" once and for all (331).

Yunior knowingly locates himself within the tradition of *metatestimonio* writing, citing famous examples of the genre like Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *Fiesta del chivo (Feast of the Goat)* (2000) in his footnotes.<sup>10</sup> However, *Oscar Wao* as a whole is skeptical of Yunior's stated project. I contend that, via its invocation of archives, Díaz's novel interrogates the intent and efficacy of *metatestimonio*—and by extension questions whether it is possible for Caribbean literature to achieve the working through of traumas such as the Trujillato. In order to support this argument, I first suggest that Yunior's attempted *zafa* unintentionally re-silences victims by withholding an archive of survivor testimony from the reader. Second, I analyze the novel's artwork, arguing that these paratextual elements constitute a counter-archive exposing the problematic nature of Yunior's *zafa*. Finally, I conclude that while *Oscar Wao* does not deny the need to address traumatic pasts, it reminds us to be cautious about over-stating literature's power to heal those pasts. The novel suggests that working through trauma is not always possible, and that in privileging our readerly desires for closure we ignore the lived realities of survivors.

### ***Páginas en Blanco: Whose Testimonio?***

In typical *metatestimonio* fashion, *Oscar Wao* calls attention to who is speaking: Yunior's voice is distinctive, and he often ruminates on his own role as interlocutor. However, by frequently invoking archival materials, the novel also calls attention to who does not, or cannot, speak. Indeed, *Oscar Wao* is at its heart the story of a forcibly absented archive. Yunior constantly informs readers about missing documents and/or gaps in the de León family narrative, which he calls "páginas en blanco" ["blank pages"]—silences introduced into the historical record through the machinations of political regimes or through trauma's effects on individual memory.

The novel is replete with such *páginas*, but two in particular fascinate Yunior. The first is a three hundred-page "exposé of the super-

natural roots of the Trujillo regime” that Oscar’s maternal grandfather, Abelard Cabral, was rumored to have written (*Oscar Wao* 245). The second is Oscar’s final book detailing the origins of the de León family *fukú*. Both texts disappear under mysterious circumstances. Although the novel is generally skeptical about the reliability of documentation, Yuniór would like to believe that these two books, if found, could provide an explanation (if not a solution) to the de León family’s troubles. Ultimately, however, he refuses to do anything but speculate about their existence or contents: “The Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral. I’m sure this is nothing more than a figment of our Island’s hypertrophied voodoo imagination. And nothing less” (246). The “nothing more” in this statement suggests a dismissal of Abelard’s manuscript, but the “nothing less” counters with an awareness that the book’s disappearance is significant and that its absence must therefore be documented. Yuniór thus settles for recording all such *páginas en blanco* as unrecoverable parts of the past.

Scholarly perception of the *páginas* and Yuniór’s treatment of them has tended to fall into two distinct camps. The first acknowledges that while the *páginas* can never really be “filled in,” Yuniór’s attempts to address them (either by imagining their potential content or acknowledging their existence) are imperfect but necessary means of narrativizing traumatic experiences, challenging official histories, and promoting healing. For example, Pamela J. Rader writes that although “the true accounts of Oscar de León’s life and those of his mother and grandfather are the ultimate *páginas en blanco*” (9), Yuniór’s telling of the family history allows the *páginas* to “become counternarratives, which resist the imposed, monolithic narratives manufactured by dictators and their tools” (1–2).<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Monica Hanna suggests that the *páginas* “become construed as a freedom that allows Yuniór to fill in the gaps in a more creative way” (500), encouraging him to write a history that allows for multiple versions of events and that imagines better futures.

Members of the second scholarly camp emphasize that while the *páginas en blanco* might be generative, they are also symptomatic of Yuniór’s tendency to silence or manipulate information contradicting the story he wants to tell—a tendency he shares with the dictatorship. Elena

Machado Saéz, for example, has convincingly argued that Yuniór withholds evidence of his own and Oscar's queerness in order to maintain the appearance of traditional Dominican machismo. She claims that "Díaz's channeling of Oscar's life through Yuniór's narrative lens reveals that even within the diaspora a silencing can occur, because the diaspora is also conditioned by the logic of the nation" (525). Other scholars, including T. S. Miller and Richard Patteson, are suspicious of Yuniór's tendency to "narrate events in which he took no part" (Miller 99) and to share knowledge he could "hardly have gleaned from either Lola or her mother" (Patteson 11), suggesting that he is fabricating his narrative—though, to be fair, Yuniór typically admits when he is speculating about events he did not witness.

While the optimism of the first reading of the *páginas* is deeply appealing, I find myself in greater agreement with the latter group of scholars, in large part because of the origins of the term *página en blanco*. Yuniór notes that it is inspired by Trujillo henchman Joaquín Balaguer, who in order to deny involvement in the death of a journalist, inserted a blank page into his memoirs: "[H]e claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course), and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. . . . Balaguer died in 2002. The *página* is still *blanca*" (90). Yuniór's use of a term associated with state violence and inspired by a Trujillist, though apparently meant to be sardonic, is deeply troubling. His co-option of the phrase suggests that even as he attempts to redefine the Trujillato's history for Dominicans, he cannot escape the regime's own discursive tactics.<sup>12</sup>

This problem becomes most apparent when we consider the other missing archive that haunts the novel and that Trujillo had no hand in creating. The *páginas en blanco* that make up this archive consist of the documents that Yuniór himself amasses in order to construct his *zafa*—Oscar's voluminous writings, the oral testimonies of Oscar's female relatives, the de León family's photographs, and Lola's letters. My belief in the existence of this set of absented *páginas* is based on an uncharacteristic feature of Díaz's writing in *Oscar Wao*: the presence of quotation marks in Yuniór's footnotes, which, I argue, denote excerpts from historical sources. As readers familiar with Díaz's work know, none



of the short stories in *Drown* (1996) or *This is How You Lose Her* (2012) utilize quotation marks to designate dialogue. In interviews, Díaz has commented that this stylistic choice is meant to reflect the slipperiness of memory: “It’s not just Ah this motherfucker doesn’t use quotes, but the way that memory works in my stories has everything to do with why there could easily be confusion between the spoken word and the imagined word” (qtd. in Lewis). Extrapolating from this, I contend that the lack of quotation marks thus introduces the possibility that Yunior is telling the *entire* story of *Oscar Wao*, drawing the dialogue of other characters largely from memory.

Yet the presence of quoted material in the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* indicates that when Yunior wants to add authority or veracity to his narrative, he doesn’t rely on “easily confused” memory—he excerpts sources verbatim. Tellingly, however, he never offers direct quotations from Oscar’s writings, or from the oral testimonies he’s gathered from Oscar’s family members. Yunior seems to trust his memory of these materials unfailingly, choosing to mediate all of their testimony, thereby (consciously or not) privileging his own voice over those of the de Léons. Díaz has suggested, and rightly so, that victims often simply *cannot* tell their own stories: “[I]t’s rarely the people who’ve been devoured by a story that get to bear witness to its ravages. Usually the survivors, the storytellers, are other people, not even family” (qtd. in O’Rourke). However, the novel is populated with other survivors—survivors who also happen to be Oscar’s family: La Inca, Belicia, and Lola—a fact that renders Yunior’s univocal telling of events problematic.

Yunior’s muting of these other voices is in direct contradiction to how he attempts to position himself in relation to the de León family history. Throughout the novel, he calls himself “your humble Watcher” (4), in reference to the character from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s *Fantastic Four* (1961) comics. This character is a sort of extraterrestrial amanuensis, tasked to observe and record events on Earth without interfering in them. Like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, who despite its wishes cannot “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (257), the Watcher can only observe the wreckage of Earth’s history piling up at its feet. When translated into the terminology of *testimonio*,

this image of the detached observer is similar to what John Beverly calls a “compiler” or “activator” (35), and what Dori Laub calls a “listener” (58): an outsider who facilitates victims’ testimony, collects it, and records it. Yunior definitely exhibits the Watcher’s desire to record information. However, he fails, as Laub puts it, “to be a witness to himself” (58), to be wary of how his own motives and desires might alter his memory of the de Leóns’ testimony.

Indeed, one of the most significant aspects of *Oscar Wao* is the fact that it makes clear that Yunior *is himself* a witness to the Trujillato. Whereas theories of testimony have typically limited the appellation of witness to those with direct experience of violence, Díaz suggests that when trauma is transgenerational and transnational, so, too, are witnessing and testimony. Thus, Dominican Americans such as Yunior, Oscar, and Lola, who are a generation removed from the ravages of the Trujillato, should be considered witnesses to that regime’s cruelty. While Yunior is ostensibly marginal to the events of the novel, he gets pulled into history, much like the Watcher (fig. 1), who is compelled to warn the Fantastic Four

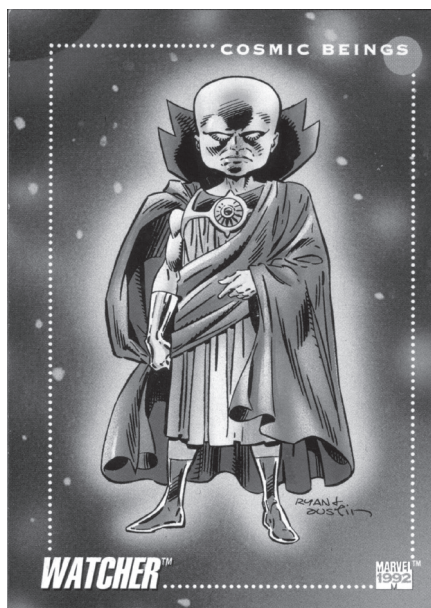


Figure 1. *Uatu the Watcher*. 1992. © Marvel.

about the planet-devouring entity Galactus. His need to come to terms with the Dominican past and his own identity—to perform his own “face work”—means that he is no longer merely recording. He is, in his own way, *testifying*. While this in itself is not problematic, Yunior’s failure to be a witness to himself means that the *zafa* he constructs is not, as he claims, for the sake of the de Leóns—it is primarily for himself. As a result, he creates *páginas en blanco* without realizing or acknowledging that he does so.

This is most obvious in the case of Oscar, who left behind a large body of writing. Readers know that Yunior has these materials, as he tells us that he keeps them in “four refrigerators” in his basement (330).<sup>13</sup> However, as Miller notes, Yunior never offers excerpts from these documents (99). Unlike, say, the narrator of Alvarez’s *Butterflies*, who provides readers portions of the Mirabal sisters’ correspondence and diaries, Oscar’s writing is never produced so that the reader can peruse it without Yunior’s mediation. This omission is clearest in the final section of the novel about Oscar’s last letter home before his death. The letter allegedly reveals that Oscar consummated his love with the prostitute Ybón and ends with the optimistic refrain, “The beauty! The beauty!” (335). Yunior’s description of the letter uses attributive phrases that suggest we are getting Oscar’s words—he notes that Oscar “reported,” “observed,” and “wrote” (334–35).

However, after all of these attributions, it is always Yunior’s voice that comes through, referring to Oscar in the third person: “He wrote that he couldn’t believe he’d had to wait for this so goddamn long” (334–35). All of these interjections amount to a kind of ventriloquism on Yunior’s part. Oscar’s voice never emerges in the first person and is instead obscured in favor of Yunior’s paraphrasing—or perhaps outright fabrication, as Machado Saéz, Miller, and Patteson suggest. I think, however, that Yunior’s subterfuge is driven not by malice or insecurity but by his need to remember Oscar’s brutal and senseless death as meaningful. As Ramón Saldívar pointedly queries, “What kind of ‘beauty’ is it that Oscar claims to have discovered in the final days of his life that might counter the horror of his murder?” (593).<sup>14</sup> Clearly, for Yunior, if Oscar dies bravely in the name of romantic love, he becomes a symbol of re-

sistance to the political terror and violent legacy of the Trujillato—a sacrificial *zafa* for the *fukú* plaguing the Dominican people. In failing to consult Oscar’s written text, Yunior is free to “impose some kind of cognitive control” (Patteson 10) over Oscar’s story, remembering it as he wishes and maintaining hope for his *zafa*.

The possibility that Yunior occludes Oscar’s testimony, even if he does so without ill intentions, is troubling, despite the fact that Oscar has been “devoured” by the story, as Díaz would put it. I am even more troubled by the possibility that Yunior’s voice overrides those of the surviving de León and Cabral women: Oscar’s adoptive grandmother La Inca, his mother Belicia, and his sister Lola. There are strong suggestions throughout the novel that Yunior has collected their oral testimonies. When he recounts Belicia’s refusal to flee the Dominican Republic after she is brutalized by Trujillo’s henchmen, he writes: “I wish I could say different but I’ve got it right here on tape” (160).<sup>15</sup> Yet despite the existence of such recordings, it is debatable whether or not readers are given direct access to these women’s voices. La Inca, for example, with her status as matriarch and her extensive knowledge of family lore, gets only a small sub-section near the end of the novel entitled “La Inca Speaks.” This section is three sentences long and, like the rest of the novel’s primary text, is not demarcated by quotation marks. While it is possible that the section represents La Inca’s voice and words, it seems equally possible that Yunior is once again mediating for the reader. Significantly, La Inca’s “speech” serves to contradict Oscar’s version of events, not Yunior’s: “He didn’t meet her [Ybón] in the street like he told you” (289). If this is indeed La Inca speaking, then one must ask why Yunior gives her so little space—allowing her testimony merely to supplement the reader’s knowledge about Oscar’s recent past instead of fleshing out the family’s larger history.

Oscar’s mother Belicia fares even worse. Her story is central to the de León family curse, and she is the family’s only direct victim of the Trujillato’s physical violence. Yunior tells us that “at the end of her life . . . Beli *would talk* about how trapped they all felt” under the dictatorship (81; emphasis added). She thus clearly offers oral testimony, even if it is much delayed. Yet Belicia does not get even La Inca’s tiny section

of the novel in which to speak to the reader. As is the case with Oscar, Yuniór invariably writes about her in the third person rather than giving us access to her words. While her body testifies eloquently to the brutality of life under Trujillo—Yuniór describes her scars as “a monsterglove of festering ruination extending from the back of her neck to the base of her spine. A bomb crater, a world-scar like those of the hibakusha” (257)—her verbal testimony is subsumed in service of Yuniór’s *fukú* narrative rather than emerging on its own terms.

Lola seems to be an exception to Yuniór’s tendency to mediate since she speaks to the reader in two large sections of the novel. This is a significant development in Díaz’s typically male-narrated writing that has earned the praise of reviewers and piqued the interest of scholars.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, the same possibility that haunted La Inca’s testimony haunts this one: Is this Lola speaking directly to the reader, or Yuniór mediating? I think that it is the former, because she directly contradicts Yuniór’s belief in *fukú* and *zafa*: “I don’t think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That’s enough” (205). Yet, though he gives Lola space to speak, he cannot resist adding his own take on her testimony. As Miller puts it, Yuniór simply “cannot fully surrender control of the narrative” (102). Her first interjection is prefaced by approximately three pages of italicized text—the only such section in the novel—referring to her in the second person. Significantly, the italicized text begins with a summing up of Lola’s life: “*This is how it all starts: with your mother calling you into the bathroom*” (Oscar Wao 51). In ascribing a seemingly mystical starting point for Lola’s narrative, this section attempts—with mixed results—to shoehorn her story into the narrative Yuniór wants to create about *fukú* and *zafa*, despite her stated disbelief in the phenomena. Yuniór thus apparently feels the need to qualify her contribution before including it in his narrative.

I can only speculate about how much of Yuniór’s story Lola would corroborate, just as I can only speculate about the content of the other *páginas en blanco* that constitute Yuniór’s withheld archive. What I can say with certainty is that the existence of these *páginas* demand that readers acknowledge Yuniór’s status and motives as a witness and analyze their own relationship to his narrative. As Machado Saéz asserts, “If readers

accept Yuniór's narrative without question, without interrogating Yuniór's narrative authority, without asking how Yuniór's desires and values shape the moral lessons implied by the ending, then we are left with a curse of our own—the curse of ignorance concerning how our own desires leave us vulnerable to the dictations of others" (551). Díaz has suggested repeatedly that although Yuniór is focused on Trujillo, "[t]he real dictatorship is the book itself, in its telling" (qtd. in O'Rourke).<sup>17</sup> Although I am hesitant to privilege authorial intention, I find Díaz's statement helpful for thinking about what the novel has to say about *metatestimonio*.

Like many writers of testimonial and dictator novels, Yuniór has the best possible intentions. He carefully acknowledges the indeterminate nature of history as well as the silences he cannot fill. He admits the possibility that his *zafa* might not work, stating his fear that, as Dr. Manhattan warns in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986), "Nothing ever ends" (331). Yet Yuniór still dreams that *his* book will put an end to *fukú*. Like Alvarez, who in her postscript to *Butterflies* contends that the Trujillato is "an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that . . . can only be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (324), Yuniór wants to believe in the power of a single, well-told story to provide healing to Dominicans at large. And as the divisive responses to the novel's *páginas en blanco* suggest, some readers would like to believe in that possibility as well. *Oscar Wao* thus offers a poignant warning: *metatestimonio* perhaps better serves the psychic needs of its author (and of readers longing for hopeful endings) than those of the victims whose story it ostensibly tells.

### **The Marvel Universe and Visual Counter-Archives**

While the novel provides important commentary on the role of author mediation in *metatestimonio*, it also troubles the idea that *zafa*-narratives such as Yuniór's can in any way facilitate working through trauma. I arrived at this latter conclusion through analysis of the artwork from the original 2007 Riverhead edition of *Oscar Wao*, which has to date received minimal attention from scholars. Along with the cover art, this edition features a frontispiece (a rocket ship or missile) and three plates (an atom, a clenched fist, and a biohazard symbol), which divide the

novel's sections. Through correspondence with Stephanie Huntwork, the book designer for this edition, I discovered that the frontispiece and plates were not part of the original book design—instead, “Junot specifically requested that imagery.” While *Oscar Wao*'s investment in comic book culture is reason enough to scrutinize the novel's artwork, Díaz's deliberate selection of these images indicates that they should be read along with the written narrative.

These four images recall Oscar's meticulously collected archive of comic books, stored in Yunior's basement refrigerators.<sup>18</sup> In reading these images, we should therefore approach them as we would any graphic narrative. Scott McCloud has famously suggested that comics panels constitute “a staccato rhythm of unconnected moments,” which, when connected by the reader through the process he labels “closure,” become legible as a “continuous, unified reality” (67).<sup>19</sup> Readers, then, are invited to engage in a process not unlike Yunior's own—compiling fragments of information into a more-or-less cohesive narrative. In my reading of these images, Oscar posthumously “speaks back” to Yunior, offering a counter-narrative that undercuts Yunior's *zafa* and criticizes his mediation of the de León family testimony.

I developed this reading after examining the frontispiece and first two plates in tandem with the novel's epigraphs. Famously, the first epigraph is from a 1966 issue of Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to Galactus?” This quotation has typically been read as a commentary on both Trujillo's disregard for human life and on the importance of subaltern histories—those “brief, nameless lives” that Yunior seeks to illuminate (Hanna 499). When this epigraph is paired with the images of the rocket ship/missile and the atom, the novel's paratext appears to offer a meditation on the nature of life in the Caribbean. Indeed, Yunior provocatively labels Hispaniola “the Ground Zero of the New World” (*Oscar Wao* 1); the rocket/missile and atom are thus fitting evocations of invasion, nuclear catastrophe, violence, and terror. Díaz has also commented frequently on how well suited science fiction is for thinking about the experience of immigration. In one of his footnotes, Yunior speculates about Oscar's love of the genre, saying that “[i]t may have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?), or

of living in the DR for the first couple 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 (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)” (22–23). The rocket ship, offering the possibility of a journey, and the atom, with its potential for transformation and energy, thus become apt analogies for immigration and diaspora.

However, if we consider the epigraph’s literal context—a quotation from a now-iconic issue of *The Fantastic Four*—the accompanying frontispiece and first plate become instantly recognizable as references to that comic book series’ narrative arc. The image of the rocket ship and the atom unambiguously reflect the Fantastic Four’s origin myths: scientist Reed Richards and crew test an experimental spaceship, are bombarded by “an unknown form of cosmic radiation,” and subsequently gain their superpowers (Dougall 100). Significantly, these superpowers are drastic physical mutations rendering the Fantastic Four both excep-

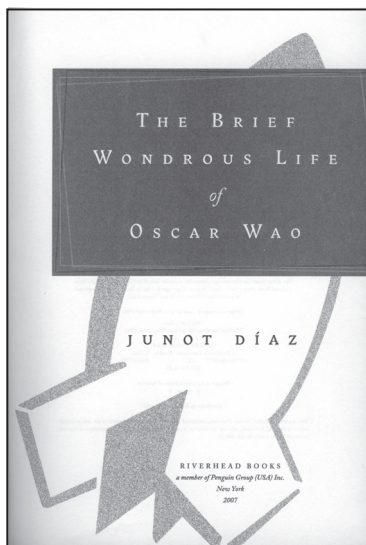


Figure 2. Frontispiece, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. 2007. © Riverhead Books.

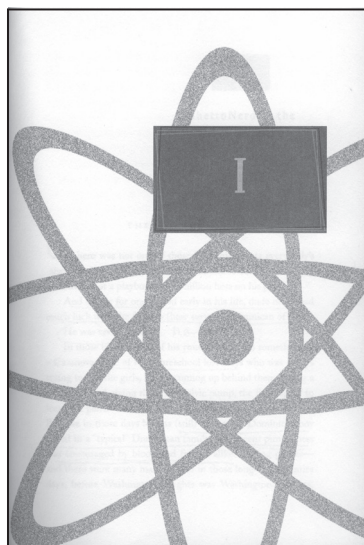


Figure 3. Plate 1, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. 2007. © Riverhead Books.



“Nothing ever ends”

tional and grotesque and marking them as visibly different from the rest of society (see fig. 4).

If we read the Fantastic Four’s narrative alongside Oscar’s own lived experiences, the correlations are suggestive. Douglas Wolk, for instance, has argued that the Fantastic Four, “a woman, her brother, her husband, and her husband’s friend—provide a way for cartoonists to play with the idea of difficult extended-family structures” (96). Oscar’s relationships with his friend Yunior, his mother, his sister, and his adoptive grandmother La Inca certainly comprise one such extended-family structure. Likewise, the sense of physical otherness experienced by the members of the Fantastic Four also characterizes Oscar’s entire life. He is a dark-complected, bad-haired, “overweight freak” (*Oscar Wao* 15), a “nerdboy” who “couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to” (21)—in the US *or* in the Dominican Republic. The Fantastic Four’s genetic mutations also recall remarks that Díaz has made about the history of race in the Caribbean being a history of genetic engineering, or as he termed it, “the breeding of people” (Blanton Public Reading). Read in this fashion, the frontispiece and the first plate thus suggest not only the sense of alienation, difference, and racialization that mark Oscar’s lived experi-



Figure 4. *Fantastic Four: Origins*. 1992. © Marvel.

ence of diaspora, but they also recall the conditions that produced his existence as an Afro-Latino subject in the New World.

Similarly, the third epigraph and the second plate (fig. 5) illuminate each other in significant ways. The epigraph is drawn from a Trujillo-era issue of the Dominican newspaper *La Nación* and declares that “Trujillo is not a man. He is . . . a cosmic force” (*Oscar Wao* 204). Such language was typical of the way that Trujillo portrayed himself to the Dominican public. As Derby notes, “The locus of the leader’s charisma . . . resided not in his body but in his alter-corpus, his body double or ‘superbody,’ a magical being who enabled Trujillo to extend his person into this world and others” (207; emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> The image of the clenched fist that directly precedes the epigraph would thus seem to be a reference to the dictator’s superhuman grip on the nation.

Yet the wording “cosmic force” is also remarkably similar to Marvel’s description of Galactus—one of the Fantastic Four’s most fearsome enemies—as a cosmic entity. Galactus is a giant being (often depicted with one clenched fist and one grasping hand) that devours planets, “destroying whole peoples and consuming entire worlds, for his hunger

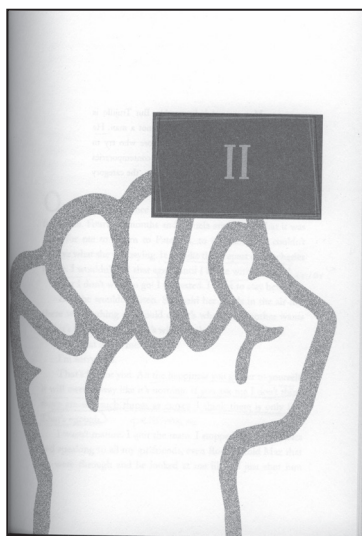


Figure 5. Plate 2, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. 2007. © Riverhead Books.

“Nothing ever ends”

is insatiable” (Dougall 106). If Galactus is world destroying, then the pairing of this epigraph and image implies that Trujillo is likewise world destroying. I would argue that, as Belicia’s experiences of torture make clear, the Trujillato is world-destroying in the sense that Elaine Scarry has described so hauntingly in *The Body in Pain* (1985): “intense pain . . . destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe” (35). Troublingly, although Galactus is prevented from devouring the Earth, he is never truly defeated by the Fantastic Four. This suggests that while Yunior’s narrative might momentarily ease the destruction wrought by the Trujillato, the regime’s threat to the Dominican people will linger well into the future.

While the image of the clenched fist hints at the possible failure of Yunior’s *zafa*, the two remaining images—which are not obviously related to the *Fantastic Four* or accompanied by epigraphs—offer a more



Figure 6. *The Coming of Galactus*. 1992. © Marvel.

direct critique of Yuniór's project and the concept of *zafa*. The cover art of *Oscar Wao* (fig. 7), designed by graphic artist Rodrigo Corral, is startling.<sup>21</sup> Oscar is profiled in a deep crimson silhouette. The image's lines are spattered and runny, evoking graffiti or blood. Coming out of Oscar's head, the shape of a wing emerges, mimicking the trajectory of the bullet that ultimately kills him. It also suggests the winged helmet of Mercury—the Roman god of travelers and messengers, a trickster figure that guides souls to the land of the dead. Such an association is fitting for Oscar given his status as transnational diasporic subject, his voluminous writings, and his efforts to unearth long-buried family secrets. Likewise, it could reference Icarus's wax wings, foreshadowing Oscar's romantic over-reaching and untimely demise.

However, Corral's commentary on the image indicates that, like the frontispiece and plates, it can be read as a reference to comic books. He states that while the cover art was influenced by Díaz's physical descriptions of Oscar, it was also inspired by Oscar's "obsessions with comic books, and incredible imagination" (Ooligan Press). I contend that this image might be a reference to the Marvel superhero Thor, created



Figure 7. Cover art, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. 2007. © Rodrigo Corral.

“Nothing ever ends”

by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1962. Aside from his mythical hammer Mjolnir, Thor’s trademark is his winged helmet.

Like the Fantastic Four, Thor is a significant character to associate with Oscar for a number of reasons. Thor is famous for loving a woman he cannot be with—Jane Foster, who ultimately marries a mortal man. The image thus might indicate, as Machado Saéz argues, that Oscar’s final letter about Ybón is Yunior’s fabrication (539–40). It may also suggest that, had Oscar survived, their affair would have been short-lived. However, I think the image has a more important link to Oscar’s life. Like his Norse namesake, Marvel’s Thor is bound by the prophecy of Ragnarok, the infinite cycle of destruction and remaking that governs the world. He is thus doomed to fight the same battles over and over throughout eternity. In the Marvel series, Thor becomes cognizant of the cyclical nature of Ragnarok and vows to put an end to it. However, that ending is ambiguous:

Unwilling to endure his people’s dishonor through yet another meaningless cycle, Thor severed the tapestry that wove the reality of Asgard’s dimension, wiping himself and all of Asgard from existence.



Figure 8. *Thor*. 1992. © Marvel.

Will Thor return? In the past, Ragnarok had been a self-perpetuating cycle, and the circumstances of Asgard's return *could spring from the same processes that restored it in the past*. But these thoughts are idle speculation. *For now*, Thor sleeps the sleep of the gods. (Dougall 303; emphases added)

This elaboration implies that even if Yuniór achieves a *zafa* with Oscar's story, it is only temporary. *Fukú* will have to be re-conquered by the Dominican people again and again. This is in keeping with the thought of trauma theorists such as Neil Smelser, who argue that working through cultural trauma should be conceived of as a "constant, recurrent struggle" (42) rather than a finite process. In other words, the image verifies that, as Yuniór fears, "nothing ever ends."<sup>22</sup> Worse yet, the image hints at the possibility that this recurrent working through is, like Ragnarok, "meaningless"—that the Dominican people's destiny is overdetermined by *fukú* and the Trujillato and thus unalterable.

While Thor is a well-known character, thanks in large part to Marvel's 2011 and 2013 film adaptations of his story, it was a bit more vexing to locate the biohazard symbol in Oscar's comic book archive. Its obvious association with pathology and contagion suggests that *fukú* is both endemic among Dominicans and transmissible—an assertion that Derby's description of the phenomenon as an "evil charge passed through bodily extensions" supports. However, the biohazard sign also serves as a warning, indicating that a pathogen has been contained but remains deadly if that containment is breached. The placement of the symbol at the end of the novel might mean that Yuniór has contained *fukú* so that its threat to the general populace is reduced. However, I think there are intriguing possibilities afforded by reading the plate as a reference to a somewhat obscure villain in the Marvel universe named, simply, Biohazard.

Biohazard is featured in the *Deathlok* comic book series, created in 1974 by Rich Buckler and Doug Moench then revised by Dwayne McDuffie in 1990. Deathlok is a military cyborg with a human brain that has been taken from a cadaver, which, as a situation, is not so far removed from Yuniór's efforts to "reanimate" Oscar for the purposes of his *zafa*.<sup>23</sup> Biohazard originates when Deathlok's first human brain,

drawn from the soldier John Kelly, is damaged and discarded. The brain mutates, becoming a monstrous creature that devours others in order to gain their memories. Biohazard becomes obsessed with regaining its lost identity, seeking to “write over its damaged set of memories with a good copy” (McDuffie and Manley). Eventually, it attempts to consume Kelly’s surviving family members, but Deathlok defeats it before it can carry out its intentions.

This sci-fi tale of reanimation is a well-suited analogue for Yunior’s *fukú-zafa* narrative, recalling both Trujillo’s own alleged supernatural powers and *fukú*’s tendency to “rise from the dead” to overtake Dominicans. The story also appears to serve as an important critique of Yunior’s narrative practices. It can be read as Oscar’s warning to Yunior from beyond the grave, a threat to return and consume Yunior psychologically. Yunior’s recurring nightmares about Oscar years after the latter’s death support such an interpretation: “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. . . .



Figure 9. Plate 3, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. 2007. © Riverhead Books.

Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (325). However, I think the image implies that Yuniór himself is akin to Biohazard. As I have noted, Yuniór does in a sense consume others, appropriating their voices in order to “write over” memories damaged by trauma and silence. Likewise, Yuniór’s fascination with the de León family is in many ways an effort to incorporate their story into his own—driven by his desire to understand his own identity as a Dominican American man and to maintain a connection with his ex-girlfriend Lola. The biohazard image, then, is a critique of Yuniór and his *zafa* narrative, depicting it as self-serving and harmful to others.

Without Yuniór’s voice to mediate it, the artwork offers up a harsh counter-narrative, developing more vehement versions of the novel’s larger criticisms of *metatestimonio* as a genre. Whereas Yuniór maintains hope that his *zafa* will work, the novel’s visual archive indicates the improbability (if not the impossibility) of such an ending. Instead, it con-

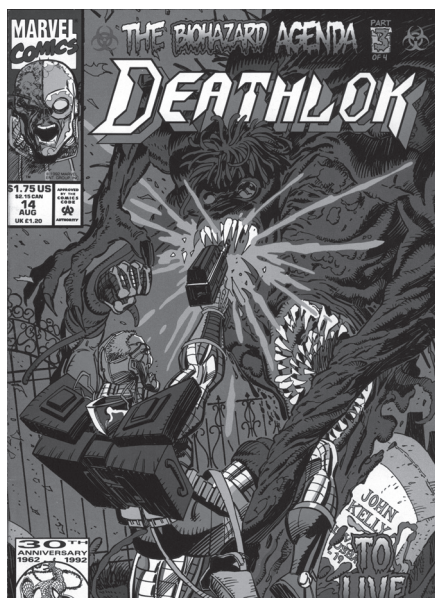


Figure 10. Cover art for “At Death’s Door,” by Mike Manley. Part 3 of *The Biohazard Agenda*. 1992. © Marvel.



firmly what Trenton Hickman suggests: “trauma created by the trujillato ‘believes in’ members of the Diasporic Dominican community because it lives in and through them, surging up at unexpected moments” (167). *Oscar Wao* thus implies that even if *metatestimonio* might function as an author’s “very own counterspell” (*Oscar Wao* 7), for the people of the Dominican Republic and its diasporas, dealing with the after-effects of the Trujillato is a never-ending process.

### Conclusion

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* does important work in claiming that Dominican Americans born after the assassination of Trujillo should be considered witnesses to that regime’s abuses. Pressured by the complex ways that histories of violence reverberate into the present, trauma theorists have of necessity developed frameworks—including transgenerational trauma and postmemory—to account for the fact that individuals can be harmed by events from which they are chronologically and geographically removed. Theories of testimony, however, still tend to reserve the appellation of “witness” for those who have direct lived experience of political terror. The plights of Yunior, Lola, and Oscar demonstrate the urgency of re-thinking the category of witness in both transgenerational and transnational terms. As Yunior makes clear, *fukú* has migrated along with the Dominican people, meaning that those living in diaspora are all witnesses to the ongoing after-effects of the Trujillato.

However, in its critique of *metatestimonio* and *zafa* narratives, the novel questions whether literature can achieve justice or healing for these diasporic witnesses. Segura-Rico asserts that the purpose of metatrimonial fiction as a genre “is to recover a historical memory that will not silence the voices of the victims and that will have political and legal implications” (176). Yunior clearly wants to help build this kind of historical memory, to make visible those “brief, nameless lives” damaged by the Trujillato and to put *fukú* to rest. Yet, in privileging his own voice, and in generating *páginas en blanco*, Yunior’s narrative demonstrates what Caren Irr calls the “dictatorial tendencies in narration” (15), i.e., that in narrativizing trauma, authors can very easily replicate the discursive

sive practices of the regimes they seek to criticize. Chillingly, the novel thus implies that it is not only the trauma of the Trujillato that “lives in and through” Dominicans. The regime’s epistemological structures do, too, by blurring the lines between *zafa* and *fukú* and forcing scholars to weigh carefully the value of *metatestimonio* against its inherent risks.

In refusing to confirm the success of Yuniór’s *zafa* and in demonstrating that some *páginas* always remain blank, Díaz refuses readers’ desire for closure and illustrates that Dominican subjects are bound to re-work the traumas of the Trujillato again and again. Saldívar argues that, ultimately, Díaz seeks “a way to coexist with the chaos” of the New World, “not because one finds peace in chaos but because in the context of the brutal histories of conquest, colonization, exploitation, and oppression in the Americas it is less duplicitous to stake an ending on chaos than on the teleologies of emergence, realism, or romance” (592). As Díaz’s novel suggests, such “coexistence” demands that authors and readers alike recognize that daily life in the New World is overdetermined by the hemisphere’s violent past and that for Caribbean witnesses, “nothing ever ends.”

## Notes

- 1 All translations mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 There were perhaps many thousands more, since an accurate casualty count was never taken after Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitian migrant workers and Haitian Dominicans on the Republic’s western border in 1937 (Derby 268). This event is dubbed the Parsley Massacre as a result of reports that Dominican soldiers asked victims to pronounce the word *perejil* (parsley). Speakers whose first language was Kreyòl had difficulty pronouncing the “r” sound and were summarily murdered. I have found estimates of the death toll ranging from a few hundred to thirty thousand.
- 3 The Mirabal sisters—Patria Mercedes (1924–60), María Argentina Minerva (1926–60), and Antonia María Teresa (1935–60)—were anti-Trujillo activists. Trujillo operatives strangled and beat the women to death, along with their driver Rufino de la Cruz (1923–60), then staged the deaths to look like a car accident. The murder of the Mirabals sparked national and international outrage and was alleged to have motivated the assassination of Trujillo.
- 4 In February of 2015, for instance, a man of Haitian descent was lynched in Santiago. While police link his death to theft, human rights activists have claimed the hanging was motivated by anti-Haitian sentiment (Brodzinsky).

- 5 As of this writing, the Museo Generalísimo’s website is defunct. However, the family continues to operate the Fundación Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina Foundation), which likewise seeks to recuperate the dictator’s image among the Dominican people.
- 6 She borrows the term from Goffman.
- 7 Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), told from the perspective of the Mirabal sisters, as well as Alexis’ *Compère général soleil (General Sun, My Brother)* (1955) and Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* (1998), both told from the perspective of Haitian Dominicans during the Perejil Massacre, are famous examples of the first subcategory of *metatestimonio*. Llosa’s *Fiesta del chivo (Feast of the Goat)* (2000), which focuses on the final days of the Trujillo regime and the immediate aftermath of the dictator’s assassination, is a well-known example of the latter category.
- 8 See, for example, the work of Bautista, Saldívar, Balkan, Barradas, and Lopez-Calvo.
- 9 See, for example, the work of Caruth as well as LaCapra’s *History and Criticism* and *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.
- 10 Díaz has been openly disdainful of Vargas Llosa’s novel: “I mean, have you read *The Feast of the Goat*? Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on that novel like it was the greatest thing on earth! And you should have seen the Dominican elites fawn over Vargas Llosa. The Great Vargas Llosa has deigned to visit the Dominican Republic! Call me a nationalist slash hater, but Vargas Llosa’s take on the Trujillo regime was identical to Crasweller’s and Crasweller wrote his biography 40 years ago!” (qtd. in Danticat, “Junot Díaz” 93). In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior mentions Alvarez’s *Butterflies* in passing as he tells the story of Oscar’s mother, Belicia: “It wasn’t like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor scholarship student” (83).
- 11 Pattenon draws similar conclusions, arguing that although it is “only Yunior’s truth, a ‘narrative reconstruction,’ that can be discovered” (12), Yunior creates a “countertext that History will recognize, filling in just enough *páginas en blanco* to ensure that neither Oscar Wao nor Oscar de León will ever be completely erased” (18).
- 12 Rader notes that Yunior acknowledges this fact himself: “The author-persona in the footnotes playfully acknowledges that, like a tyrant, he brings his bias and his version of history to the table” (3). While she views this as a humorous nod to the *novela del dictador* tradition, I am less convinced of its benign nature.
- 13 Heredia points to the basement refrigerator in her estimation of Yunior as “an educator who holds knowledge, or cultural archive” (219).
- 14 This refrain has also been viewed with skepticism by Pattenon: “The faint, ironic echo of Kurtz’s last words from *Heart of Darkness* only underscores the horror, the horror of the price Oscar pays for that moment of bliss” (13).
- 15 Oscar also apparently made recordings, as readers are given a brief excerpt of Ybón speaking, “AS RECORDED BY OSCAR” (289).

- 16 See, for example, Fasler's *Atlantic* article and Urioste-Buschmann's scholarly article. Significantly, Díaz has stated that it was not his idea to allow Lola to speak: "Actually, my ex-fiancée's mentor told me that I should have a chapter about Lola. And in some ways she saved the book, the book was literally falling apart when this law professor suggested it. If it hadn't been for my ex-fiancée, and her law professor, the book would not have held together" (qtd. in Moreno 540).
- 17 Several scholars have echoed this sentiment, including Machado Saéz, Patteson, and Irr.
- 18 Wolk has commented extensively on comics-collecting as an archival practice, arguing that "[t]he first wave of comics collectors were trying to preserve the past of their culture—to rescue the ephemeral pamphlets that made up comics' fragile history from the quick and sure destruction they were intended for" (65). In some ways, then, we might consider Oscar's collecting as akin to Yuniór's compiling of testimony—an effort to rescue certain voices from the obscurity of history.
- 19 McCloud defines closure as "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (62).
- 20 Derby explains that Trujillo encouraged the public to consider him a supernatural being. Trujillo allegedly had the help of a separate being known as a *muchachito*—a guardian angel or homunculus who "was blessed with the powers of divination" and came to the dictator in his sleep to warn him of enemy plots (Derby 211).
- 21 Corral also designed the covers for both of Díaz's short story collections.
- 22 This emphasis on the cyclical nature of working through trauma is also hinted at in the name of Oscar's niece, Isis. In Egyptian mythology, Isis is wife to Osiris and mother of Horus. She resurrects Osiris after he is murdered by his brother, then is impregnated and gives birth to her son. She is thus linked to birth, death, and rebirth—the most basic cycle in human existence.
- 23 In McDuffie's revised version of the series, Deathlok's brain comes from Michael Collins, an African American scientist and pacifist. This version of *Deathlok* is concerned with themes similar to those explored in *Oscar Wao*: Afro-diasporic identity, double consciousness, racial oppression, and political violence. For a more extensive discussion of McDuffie's *Deathlok*, see the work of Rivera.

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