



2014

HYBRIDITY, TRAUMA, AND QUEER IDENTITY: READING MASCULINITY ACROSS THE TEXTS OF JUNOT DÍAZ

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HYBRIDITY, TRAUMA, AND QUEER IDENTITY:
READING MASCULINITY ACROSS THE TEXTS OF JUNOT DÍAZ

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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2014

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ABSTRACT

When writing about Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012), I focus on the iterations of masculinity depicted and embodied by Yunior de las Casas, the primary narrator of this collection. I explore the links between diaspora, hybridity, masculinity, and trauma, arguing that both socio-historical and personal traumatic experience reverberates through the psyches and bodies of Díaz's characters. I demonstrate the relationship between Yunior's navigation of the United States and the Dominican Republic and his ever-shifting sexuality, self-presentation, and gender identity. The physical and discursive spaces he must traverse contain multiple, contradictory narratives about how to be a man; within Díaz's collection, we witness Yunior's coming-to-terms with the way that these stories of masculinity are rendered dysfunctional and incoherent. Accordingly, Yunior uses the hegemonic discourses of masculinity as a way to cloak his own queer difference, ambivalently interacting and identifying with characters marked as Other. In this analysis, I read Yunior's masculinity as reactionary to the expectations of Dominican society, and also explore how he shaped by migration, trauma, and unspeakable queer desire.

KEY WORDS: Junot Díaz; Dominican Republic; masculinity; queer; Yunior

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Chapter One

Introduction

In my discussion of Junot Díaz's short stories and novel, I am most interested in tracing the development of Yuniór de las Casas' masculinity and sexuality across *Drown* (1996), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). Yuniór frequently acts as narrator within Díaz's collections, his voice dictating the tone of the stories. When these texts are read as one essential narrative with Yuniór at the center, they reveal one man's prolonged search for love in the context of personal and collective historical trauma. In addition to reading Yuniór as a survivor of political upheaval and violence, I am interested in the presentation of his masculinity, engagement with romantic relationships, and treatment of male friendships. Díaz's work provides a lush, poly-vocal, and historically rich account of growing up between two countries while offering especially acute insight into the way that one character's masculinity is continually reshaped over the course of his life. In reading Yuniór, I am especially invested in the way these texts interact with and contribute to understandings of transmigrant identity and gender performance.

Several other critics have addressed the cross-section of masculinity and diasporic identity with Díaz's work. Elena Machado Sáez,¹ for example, argues that the structure of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* mimics the diversity of Dominican-American identity while revealing the ways that diaspora dictates the borders of masculinity and sexuality (523). Machado Sáez suggests that the reader, like Yuniór himself, is seduced into heteronormatively policing the masculinity of Díaz's main characters. Furthermore, she argues that Yuniór's inability to tell his own story drives him to silence Oscar's "queer Otherness" and fabricate the fiction of his virginity loss. As with my reading of Díaz, Machado Sáez argues that Yuniór's obsession with Oscar is connected to his own masked queer desires; Yuniór must discipline Oscar's difference because he must constantly police himself (524, 552). In another analysis of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Dixia Ramírez² addresses the traumatic history of hyper-masculinity and

¹ "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance."

² "Great Men's Magic: charting hyper-masculinity and supernatural discourses of power in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."

patriarchy on the island and the way in which that legacy continues to haunt diasporic Dominicans (384). Directly speaking to the novel's characters as transmigrants, her article depends upon the idea that the pull of the Dominican Republic is strong enough that it can cause characters to revisit and even relive a variety of traumatic experiences (387). Ramírez argues that these characters use supernatural discourse as a means for contending with patriarchal power, a coping mechanism that transcends the confines of borders and generations. In her reading of the novel, Monica Hanna³ also analyzes the relationship between diasporic identity and narrative structure, figuring the text as a means for constructing a "resistance history" of the Dominican Republic and its socio-historical connection to the United States (500). In so doing, she provides a more optimistic interpretation of Yunior, arguing that he provides a voice for those who have been silenced by the violence of Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic; she sees his narration as an alternative history shaped by love rather than violence (504, 505, 508).

These readings of Díaz's novel primarily address Yunior as the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. My analysis, however, rests upon reading Yunior's progression as the primary narrative voice across all three of Díaz's texts; it demands that we see the change in Yunior over the course of his lifetime, to recognize his ever-shifting relationship with his transmigrant Dominican identity and various iterations of masculinity. Like previous critics, I see his masculinity as interacting with and reacting to the experience of migration and the translated norms of Dominican society. By understanding Yunior's voice – and his silences – as part of his movement toward embodying a new breed of Dominican-American transmigrant masculinity, I read Yunior as a more complex character than previous critical discussions have provided. Accordingly, I allow for a more encompassing and interconnected reading of Yunior's character development, acknowledging the various iterations of trauma in Díaz's texts and the complex negotiations that the in-between space of Dominican-American identity requires. Though I read his masculinity as primarily reactionary to the expectations of Dominican society, I also provide for the complex ways it is shaped by the alienating experience of migration and unspeakable queer desire.

³ "'Reassembling the Fragments': Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."

In the following discussion, I therefore focus portions of my analysis on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, using stories from *Drown* and *This is How You Lose Her* to supplement my reading of Díaz's body of work. I gaze through the lens of trauma theory in order to examine Yunior's position as a survivor of sexual and psychological abuse within his own personal experience and as part of the collective Dominican diasporic community. I explore the ways in which his position as a transmigrant informs how he comprehends the historical present and shapes his understanding of the past and present as inextricably bound together. I then analyze Yunior's masculinity against that of other male characters, seeking to understand how his self-presentation is shaped by traumatic experience, violent iterations of masculinity, and a desire to eschew queer identifications. As an aspect of that analysis, I delve into Yunior's experiences with intimacy and the theme of infidelity within his heterosexual relationships. The combined force of this discussion provides insight into the ways that one Dominican-American man comes to terms with a traumatic history that is both personal and political, confronting himself on the page as a means to, as Audre Lorde urges,⁴ "reach down into that deep place of knowledge...and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears" (113).

Overview: *Drown* and *This is How You Lose Her*

Though Yunior's family moves to the United States after the Trujillo dictatorship has ended, he spends the first part of his life within the Dominican Republic. Díaz's first collection of short stories, *Drown*, contains many selections ("Ysrael," "Fiesta, 1980," "Aguantando," "Drown," "Boyfriend," "Edison, New Jersey," "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," "No Face," and "Negocios") that examine Yunior's childhood in both countries. Shifting between the United States and the Dominican Republic and across various periods of Yunior's child and adulthood, the trajectory of these stories mirrors Yunior's back-and-forth position as a transmigrant. As the narrator, Yunior stays in the shadows, more observer than participant. Though he is a withdrawn child, the acuteness of Yunior's observation of the poverty and emotional ruin

⁴ "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

within his family sets a tone that shapes our understanding of the man he later becomes. In later collections, he transitions into more of an active participant in the discourse of masculine ethos, less a pawn for his father and brother and more of a dominant man, himself. As much as Yuniór tries to mask the vulnerable, sensitive boy we encounter in these early stories, however, reading his early powerlessness is essential to understanding the actual man behind the macho persona of his later life.

The affect of *Drown* is similar to the tone of Díaz's third collection, *This is How You Lose Her*, a set of stories that focus on the way being an immigrant shapes Yuniór's romantic relationships and sense of possibility. Whereas *Drown* is more concerned with familial love, *This is How You Lose Her* revolves around romantic love and sexual intimacy. In this collection, Yuniór mainly narrates his own experiences in his twenties and thirties—stories about the less-recent past are told in a reflective or flashback manner, rather than as present-moment tales of childhood. In this collection, Yuniór examines the relationships he's had with various women while also scrutinizing and re-visiting the romantic trysts had by his father, Ramón, and his brother, Rafa. In facing his own difficulty with fidelity and intimacy, Yuniór attempts to understand the way that he, and the super-masculine men surrounding him, have mistreated women. Not only does Yuniór examine these romantic relationships from his own perspective as, alternately, either an observer or participant, he also makes a major imaginative shift and embodies the perspective of his father's second wife in the United States in the story "Otravida, Otravez." Placing himself behind the female gaze allows Yuniór to begin to see his own transgressions from a different angle. In this collection, Yuniór may scrutinize the way his father and brother interact with women as a means to more clearly understand himself, but he attempts to get out of his own head in order to do so, a choice that is especially evident in "The Pura Principle," "Invierno," and "Otravida, Otravez".

The selections that explore various infidelities and breakups in Yuniór's own romantic past slowly shift tonally and emotionally over the course of the collection, revealing Yuniór's dawning understanding about why he cheats on all the women he loves. Though he allows the reader to draw the thematic connections, Yuniór's coming-to-terms with himself arrives in the form of metafictional twist: he only begins to feel free when he begins to write "the cheater's guide to love"—essentially, the exact

collection that Díaz has created with *This is How You Lose Her* (216). For Yunior, the act of writing, filling the *paginas en blanco* in his personal history, moves him closer to understanding the way that both private and collective history shape identity. Writing himself toward redemption provides an alternative way of seeing the past and achieving his central goal of becoming a new man.

Overview: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The text that falls between these two short story collections is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a novel ostensibly about the life of a fat, Dominican-American boy obsessed with love, writing, sci-fi, and his own intense desire to trace his family's story within the Dominican Republic. Unlike Yunior, Oscar is actually born in the United States. Though Oscar's immediate family is based in the United States, his grandmother remains in the Dominican Republic. He, too, embodies a transmigrant identity, repeatedly returning to the Dominican Republic in order to seek out his family's story and reconcile his ancestral past. Oscar's mother, Belicia, is silent about her past as a young woman in the Dominican Republic; much of the novel circulates around piecing together her life story and contextualizing her larger familial narrative within the politico-social space of Trujillo's reign. Though the novel presents itself as a text about Oscar, it is equally about the intertwined histories of the United States and the Dominican Republic.

Like Díaz's two other texts, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is concerned with intimacy, sexuality and love while also remaining attentive to the trappings of exile. As an unattractive, nerdy lover-boy, Oscar is a foil to Yunior, who finally reveals himself as the voice of the novel nearly two-thirds of the way through the text. In this portion of his life, Yunior is Oscar's college roommate, though he actually becomes close to the de León-Cabral family through his friendship, and eventual relationship with, Oscar's sister, Lola. Yunior begins his story with an explanation of the *fuku* on Oscar's family, claiming that his storytelling may be a form of *zafa*, or protection. In act of telling, however, it becomes clear that Yunior's story is also about another, larger curse that haunts all of the characters who have escaped the Dominican Republic. The *fuku* that reverberates through

the lives of de León-Cabral is not an isolated series of ill-fated incidents that alter the trajectory of one family, but rather the curse of colonization and its iterations. It becomes evident that history of dictatorship and colonization in the Dominican Republic is inextricably bound to the history between the Caribbean and the United States, a fraught and bloody saga that continues to affect second and third-generation immigrant children. As an effect of bearing witness to the violence, poverty, and sexual trauma that has so altered the lives of their mothers and fathers, this *fuku* comes in the form of gaping silences in their family histories – *paginas en blanco* – that forcefully shape the lives of younger characters like Yunior, Oscar, and Lola.

One of the effects of this *fuku* involves the foreclosure of intimacy in the lives of these characters – if they have learned anything from witnessing their mothers and fathers, it is that love is dangerous. For the women in these stories, their intense loyalty sabotages their personal lives; troubling issues with infidelity and emotional paralysis ruin the men. Oscar’s mother, Belicia, nearly dies from a ghastly beating in a cane field that she endures in the name of love; Yunior’s mother, Virta, almost starves waiting for his father to return to the Dominican Republic to bring them to the United States; Yunior’s father, Ramón, abandons his first family to start a second in the United States, and then abandons the second to return to the first; Yunior’s brother, Rafa, endlessly brags to Yunior about his sexual conquests and infidelities. Over the course of the two short story collections, Yunior’s father and brother have multiple girlfriends, mistresses, and women-on-the-side; Yunior himself seems addicted to meaningless affairs and sabotages the majority of his intimate relationships.

With marked consistency, betrayal and loss cause the foreclosure of intimacy between characters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*—and in all of Díaz’s stories. The characters he frames have escaped the rape culture and terror of the Dominican Republic only to feel suspended between two worlds, isolated from each other and patrolled by the memories and mores of their home country. This traumatic preclusion of intimacy dramatically shapes Yunior’s masculinity as he attempts to navigate a range of friendships and romantic connections. Across Díaz’s three books, Yunior can be read as a survivor slowly coming to terms with his own trauma while learning how to embody a form of masculinity that has never been modeled for him.

Oscar – completely vulnerable in his every utterance, unattractive, nerdy, romantic – forces Yunior to recognize that there are other ways to perform masculinity. Though Oscar unsuccessfully navigates Dominican-American society, his insistence on pursuing the woman he loves and his unfailing transparency about who he actually is gives Yunior a sense of alternative ways of being a man. The model Oscar offers is not completely transformative for Yunior, but, in the very least, provides a way in which to examine himself by confronting a ghost that he cannot release. What Oscar's narrative also reinforces, however, is the dangerous nature of romantic love and its power; his death in the name of love verifies Yunior's fear of intimacy.

Both Oscar and Yunior are survivors of various forms of trauma, and have witnessed the after-effects of the Trujillo regime reverberate through the lives of their family members. Each of them seeks to understand the nature of this trauma by obsessively researching their families, mining their own experiences, returning to the Dominican Republic to understand the history of that country, and trying to fill various *paginas en blanco*. For both of them, writing is a *zafa* against the violence and pain surrounding their lives, and creates a safe space for self-reflection; filling the *paginas en blanco* becomes a form of empowerment. Oscar's voice and life-story are contextualized by Yunior's narrative structure, the plot of the novel driven by Oscar's brief life and violent death; Yunior's voice provides Oscar with a centrality he is never able to achieve while alive. As in Díaz's other collections, Yunior's hybrid position shapes the narrative; though he is a main character his voice is often reflective and informative, providing a distinct socio-cultural context for the story he's telling. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is rife with footnotes that provide snippets of the history of the Dominican Republic and explain the norms of the Dominican community in and around New York City. These footnotes and interjections reinforce the political nature of the personal narratives generated within Díaz's collections.

Chapter Two

Yunior's Hybridity

Díaz's collections articulate a distinctly hybrid, transmigrant mentality as his characters constantly move between the Dominican Republic, the United States, and

Dominican-American communities within the United States, appropriating and internalizing aspects of each. Ernesto Sagás and Sintia E. Molina define transmigration arguing that transmigrants cross over “diverse social and cultural boundaries...tying together the values of local, national, and global traditions” (2). In a broader sense, however, the Dominicans in these stories are also transcultural, meaning that they are able to “develop a broader cultural identity that rearticulates their *dominicanidad*” (2). Migration, therefore, does not take Dominicans farther away from the discourse of their homeland, but reinforces that identity within the confines of a new space – specifically, in this case, the outer boroughs of New York and New Jersey. Transmigration is not a process of disconnection, but involves linking the country of origin with the new country in which one has settled, therefore maintaining traditions, relationships, and identities across borders (5). Yunior’s transmigrant identity clearly shapes the way he links the stories of his childhood, the de León-Cabral family, and the history of the two countries of which he is a part.

Inhabiting a hybrid space also makes it more difficult for Yunior to extract himself from what he calls the *fuku*, or curse, of the Dominican Republic. He indirectly describes this *fuku* as rooted in a historical legacy of machismo, colonization, political repression, and the use of rape as a control mechanism. In Rafael Trujillo’s Dominican Republic, the main characters’ concept of ‘home’ is complicated by violence; exile becomes necessary to stay alive. This is not an isolated experience specific to the characters within Díaz’s books, but true to the recorded history of migration from the Dominican Republic. As Janira Bonilla⁵ explains, “for many Dominicans, home is synonymous with political and/or economic repression and it is all too often a point of departure on a journey of survival” (200). Each of Díaz’s three books circulates around life in and between the Dominican Republic and the United States, though *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the only text that directly addresses the historical narrative of the Dominican Republic, specifically the period under the Trujillo dictatorship, which ran from 1930-1961. Though many Dominicans sought refuge during the bloody reign of Trujillo – as with Yunior’s family and the de León-Cabrals – the collapse of the dictatorship brought hundreds of thousands of Dominicans into other

⁵ “Transnational Consciousness: Negotiating Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz.”

countries; those who migrated to the United States primarily reside in New York (Sagás and Molina, 2). Yunior's narration actively reflects the Dominican immigration experience of resettlement and reidentification in the wake of diaspora.

To understand Yunior, we must comprehend the ways that he navigates various histories, traumas, families, and geographies in order to begin to understand himself. He is born in the Dominican Republic, and comes of age between New Jersey projects and Dominican enclaves of New York; as an adult, he lives mainly in the United States outside of Dominican communities, periodically returning to the Dominican Republic. As with many Dominican immigrants, who, as Jorge Duany⁶ explains, tend to “remain socially encapsulated in their own communities,” Yunior's experience in the United States is heavily shaped by the traditions of a homeland that, in language and culture, has been almost directly translated to Dominican communities like Washington Heights (37). Living in predominantly Dominican neighborhoods falls in stark contrast to the generalized Dominican experience within the greater United States, where, Duany states, “the dominant image of Dominicans in the United States has been uncharitable from the start,” and where Dominicans remained one of the most stigmatized ethnic minorities in the 1980s and 1990s (44). Yunior not only internalizes the dominant social constructs, gender rules, and racialized structures that hold within Dominican society, but he also comes of age at a time and in a place where Dominicans have been “intensely criminalized and racialized in the popular imaginary of the United States” (45). Though neighborhoods like Washington Heights provide sheltering spaces to Dominican immigrant populations, these same communities functioned as media targets in the 1980s and 1990s, when “the mainstream media portrayed New York's Dominican community as strange, disorderly, and dangerous” (44). Simultaneously, Dominicans who returned to the island from New York were stigmatized and “frequently represented as alien to national culture and used as scapegoats for numerous social problems” (44). As Duany suggests with his ethnographic and historical research, even when they should ostensibly be ‘at home,’ Dominican-Americans experience discrimination in each country, unable to comfortably situate themselves in neither.

⁶ “Los Países: Transnational Migrant from the Dominican Republic to the United States.”

As with Dominican transmigrants, Yuniór's hybridity is a defining aspect of his identity, expressed in his movement between English and Spanish, third and first person, physical geographic spaces, and narrative swings between tense and temporal situation. In part, Díaz's style has been labeled as revolutionary⁷ because of the rhythm and type of writing he produces stylistically mimics the multiplicity and anxiety of embodying an identity that remains suspended between two countries. Yuniór is shaped not only by his desire to move between countries, to know where he comes from in order to determine why and who he is, but also by the ways that he is dually ostracized in each place. His need to straddle multiple cultural positions is most notably present within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with his repeated narrative shifts from third person to first person, the interjection of historical footnotes, movement deeper into and back out of historical narrative, use of magical realism, and un-translated Spanish. The narrative strategy that Yuniór employs is what Casielles-Suárez⁸ calls "radical hybridism" in which "Díaz forces Spanish onto English and creates the type of heterogenous and partly unintelligible discourse he is interested in" (477, 482). When reading the stories that are told in Yuniór's voice, we are powerfully shifted into different subjectivities, and feel the strength of the pull between the two countries. For readers who are not multi-lingual and versed in Dominican culture, the languages Yuniór speaks and the socio-historical references he makes are as incomprehensible as English language idioms would be to Yuniór's young migrant self.

Yuniór consistently implements a mixed narrative vocabulary that includes elements of rap-based rhythm, Black English, Spanglish, and more formal, academic English. The way that Yuniór uses language alternately reveals and obscures the message he wishes to convey; he self-consciously uses a streetwise tone to conceal the vulnerability so evident in his earlier stories. Though the rhythm of his words are true to the Dominican-American community of which he is a part, the macho language he employs masking the emotions he may actually feel in response to the narratives he tells. A noticeable shift occurs between Díaz's first collection, *Drown*, and his second, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, wherein Yuniór takes the anxiety and helplessness

⁷ See, for example, work by: Scott; Kakutani; Tayler; Kelts; Casielles-Suárez.

⁸ "Radical Code-switching in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."

that mark his earlier childhood stories and shifts his voice to align more closely with typical Dominican machismo, the type of masculinity that his brother, Rafa, has always projected. Yuniór's linguistic self-crafting is as noticeable and intentional as the body-sculpting he does at the gym. He forcefully alters the way he chooses to describe himself so that he quickly transforms from a defenseless boy into a streetwise, macho player. In order to do so, Yuniór uses both English and Spanish differently, appropriating the rough slang of his male relatives and friends as his own. Yuniór learns how to use language to cloak himself in an acceptable form, and to deflect attention away from his own vulnerability. Rather than recount the ways in which he has been labeled as weak by so many of his male relatives, for example, Yuniór takes the slang of his young adulthood and uses it against Oscar, a character who can less easily fit into the model of prescriptive Dominican masculinity.⁹

Yuniór's shifting tone provides insight into the complicated navigations of one man whose persona must change to fit the expectations of multiple socio-geographic spaces. Embodying what Bonilla¹⁰ calls "transnationalism as a form of consciousness," Yuniór engages in a negotiation of multiple 'spaces' at once as he moves between mainstream American culture, Dominican-American neighborhoods, and the Dominican Republic (203). What we witness across the span of Díaz's three collections is Yuniór's "process of mediation and harmonizing to produce a multifaceted and resilient identity that challenges notions of identity in the native culture and the new culture" (204). In Yuniór's negotiation process, he is alternately not enough or too much – in the Dominican Republic he is not masculine enough, not a native speaker, Americanized, and in the United States he is 'too Dominican,' too masculine, a cheater, an indeterminately-raced-Spanish-speaker, un-American. In addition to the many types and layers of trauma he vicariously experiences via his stories of (and experiences in) both the historical and contemporary space of the Dominican Republic, Yuniór also details the anxiety of growing up in a place where he will always feel marginalized. Díaz's texts chronicle Yuniór's difficulty in navigating conflicting versions of masculinity while simultaneously illustrating his migrant hybridity.

⁹ This is a point I will examine in greater detail later in this conversation.

¹⁰ "Transnational Consciousness: Negotiating Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz"

Yunior's narrative voice also acts as a *testimonio*, a form of witnessing that, according to The Latina Feminist Group,¹¹ offers "an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community" (3). Traditionally a means of giving a voice to those who have been silenced, the *testimonio* shows "how personal experience contains larger political meaning" while creating specialized discursive spaces for Latin@ narratives (3). Historically, the *testimonio* has been "a form of expression that has come out of extreme repression or struggle," told to a witness who then translates, writes, edits, and publishes the story; historically, the person who experiences the event depends upon a witness who then crafts the narrative in a different language or form (13). In Díaz's texts, Yunior's situation as interior and exterior to his stories allows him to function as such a witness, coming to terms with the 'struggle' from the inside outward. His mixed use of language, adherence to and rejection of various norms, and varied narrative perspective locate Yunior as a uniquely-positioned voice of *testimonio*. Yunior articulates previously untold stories that span generations and countries. He is furthermore embedded in the tradition of *testimonio* through his desire to render visible *papelitos guardados*, "the stories often held from public view" (20). These *papelitos guardados*, according to The Latina Feminist Group, "express the full complexity of our identities, from the alchemies of erasure and silencing to our passions, joys, and celebrations" (20). Yunior's narrative practice places him in conversation not only with multiple cultural traditions and languages, but also with a longstanding feminist practice of "bearing witness" that captures complex and layered Latin@ lives while remaining grounded within a framework of resistance, memorialization, and historical narratology (20, 19). Yunior's voice may, at times, appear aggressively masculine, but this tone is merely a single layer marking his complex identity, which, at times, obscures his obvious affinity with the women and outcasts unable to project their own voices. Yunior is able to recognize the privilege of his masculine position while also maintaining alliances to queer outsiders.

Queer Discourse

¹¹ *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

Though I will later elaborate upon Yuniór's 'queerness' as it is marked in various situations within Díaz's texts, I would like to clarify how I use this term, as Yuniór's queer identifications are potentially manifold. As a child, Yuniór is seen as weak and sensitive within the confines of hegemonic Dominican masculinity, the measure by which all men are stretched. In Dominican culture, gender and sexuality are inextricably intertwined; a heavily-policed discourse of compulsory heterosexuality within the country has produced and reproduced what de Moya¹² calls "a totalitarian image of dominant masculinity" (73). Referencing Fuller, de Moya explains that, in the Dominican Republic, "homosexuality is an ever-present phantom, which forms an intrinsic part of the constitution of identity of the gender role" (90). From childhood forward, any perceived feminization is equated with homosexuality and mothers are expected to police their male children for signs of potentially gay behavior.

When Yuniór cries as a child, exhibits any sort of identification with either non-normative males or females, or spurns aggressive sexual conquests, he automatically becomes a queer suspect. Yuniór's father and brother try to forcefully shape his masculinity while also modeling exclusively hegemonic behavior themselves, endorsing a system in which "feminine behavior in young males is repressed, silenced and expelled in the household culture as a broken taboo and a family stigma" (92). Similarly aggressive correctional behavior is evident in Oscar's experience of Dominican masculinity, as family, friends, strangers, and Yuniór himself, shame Oscar for failing to demonstrate hegemonically-sanctioned masculinity and virile (hetero)sexuality. In Díaz's texts, as in many Dominican communities, masculinity is "a totalitarian notion that produces intricate strategies (power games) for men to oppress other men and to prevent oppression by them" (98). Such a system results in an adaptive masculinity, wherein "a multiplicity of (situational) masculine identities is displayed by each man" (98). Fittingly, we witness Yuniór's adaptive sexuality and gender expression become increasingly transparent as he progresses through adulthood. In Yuniór's early sensitivity, his childhood indifference toward women, and his gay sexual interactions – all of which he tries to obscure – he is marked as 'queer' as measured against the norms of the dominant Dominican culture. In order to fit in, he allows himself to be powerfully

¹² "Power Games and Totalitarian Masculinity in the Dominican Republic."

shaped into an acceptable man, one who later enforces these same ritualistic and patriarchal masculinities, to which he struggles to adhere.

The definition of 'queer' takes additional forms within the context of this analysis, notably in the fact that both Oscar and Yuniór pointedly begin to 'queer' the cultural systems that have so constrained their personal masculinities and sexualities. As Elia¹³ asserts, "the notion of *queer* upsets the taken-for-granted assumptions about the solidity, fixity of sexual identity, identity politics, and assimilationism" (77). In contesting and interrogating the totalitarian masculinity inherent to Dominican culture, and in eventually defining their own terms of masculinity, these men challenge the gender expressions available to them. They are therefore able to appropriate queerness as a form of power, a means of creating openings and possibility. To do so, however, they must choose to tear off the mask of prescriptive masculinity, essentially exposing themselves as vulnerable. This is the struggle that colors Yuniór's narratives.

In a discussion of queer performativity, Butler¹⁴ generates an expansive definition of the term 'queer' as ever-shifting according to socio-political systems:

If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, and queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes (19).

'Queer' may be seen as a problematically difficult term to demarcate, or, alternately, may be read as a site of potential imaginings. By ultimately pushing against hegemonic discourses, characters like Yuniór and Oscar *queer* the definition of what it means to be a Dominican-American man. However, as Sedgwick¹⁵ affirms, their position as non-white, diasporically-produced transmigrant subjects already places these men in a queer situation. Sedgwick makes the argument that the term 'queer' spans outward, inclusive of "the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses...the fractal intricacies of skin, migration, state" (9). It is not surprising that Sedgwick connects diaspora, migration,

¹³ "Queering Relationships."

¹⁴ "Critically Queer."

¹⁵ "Queer and Now."

citizenship and skin color to the discourse of queer theory. Like multifaceted transmigrant identity, queerness pushes against the stiff borders and tight strictures of heteronormativity, forcibly questioning essentialist constraints.

Defining Trauma

My reading of Yunior is as a survivor of diaspora-connected trauma that includes instances of personal sexual violation and the collective memory of sexual assault within the greater whole of the Dominican Republic. Though one momentous incident of sexual trauma for Yunior is never directly represented in this collection, there are micro-traumas that prick the surface of his story. Insinuations of a *pagina en blanco* – an unarticulated portion of his life – lead readers to conclude there are many stories he's incapable of telling about himself. Furthermore, though he never directly states his own violation, Yunior's identification with women and marginalized characters provides insight into his self-perception as another outsider. In addition to sexual trauma, Yunior also experiences the trauma of migration. He frequently examines the difficulty of being caught between two countries after migrating to the United States as a child; his identity as a transmigrant produces an additional layer of complexity when searching for his roots, grounded as they are within the mixed histories of two nations. In his search for a larger socio-political frame for his own life, Yunior unearths stories about his own and the de León-Cabral families, around which the narrative of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* circulates.

Yunior's anxiety about his deep-seated vulnerability is also linked to his position as a survivor of several types of trauma. As a victim of sexual abuse, a child of a violent diaspora, and a witness to others' parallel experiences, Yunior recognizes himself as inherently susceptible—especially to the hyper-masculine men who have constructed the political and social situation in which terror and sexual trauma are normalized. In order to disguise himself, Yunior therefore slips in and out of the guise of this form of masculinity. Yunior's experience with personal and collective trauma informs the way that he presents himself as a man, shapes his obsession with recounting stories of characters who subvert dominant paradigms of masculinity, and creates barriers to

intimacy and fidelity in his relationships with women. It is impossible to disconnect his enactment of masculinity from the direct and indirect traumatic experiences he alternately recounts and obscures. Accordingly, Díaz's three books function as an examination of the ways that Yunior's self-presentation shifts in response to the requirements of survival. These narratives stylistically thematize the ways in which post-diaspora identities and masculinities are shaped by political and social events – those within the personal scope and experience of a character, and those within the substance of collective Dominican-American memory.

The way in which Yunior straddles multiple countries, voices, and languages therefore translates to his perception of, and interaction with, many types of traumatic experience. In discussing Yunior's own position as a 'survivor' we must acknowledge that the definition of trauma shifts as we move between narratives and countries. In the Dominican Republic, trauma means torture, beatings, interrogation, imprisonment, rape, burning, starvation, sexual molestation, and the erasure of one's identity, notebooks, and handwriting. In the United States, 'trauma' comes in different forms: poverty, condemnation to menial labor, social isolation, racism, outsider status, silence, and cultural and linguistic segregation. For Yunior, there is also a tertiary level of trauma that is embedded within the greater immigrant experience, which involves multiple levels of ostracization within the Dominican Republic *and* the United States. Because Yunior is neither Dominican nor American enough, the straddling that he performs remains a point of traumatic experience, placing him as a forever-outsider. I therefore position Yunior as a survivor in a way that allows for multiple readings of the term; understanding his position as such is key to comprehending the complexity of Díaz's texts and the traumatic experiences detailed therein.

The trauma explored in Díaz's three volumes follows the rhetoric of a post-1970s expansion of psychological discourse in which the definition of the term encompasses a range of first and second-hand experiences, including sexual abuse, rape, exile, migration, and racism. As Kenneth McLaughlin¹⁶ explains, in academic and professional sectors the "language of trauma" is now applied in the discussion of hurt experienced by both individuals and groups. At times, such communities are completely "*bound together*

¹⁶ *Surviving Identity*.

through a shared discourse of trauma” (61, italics original). Accordingly, the Dominicans in Díaz’s texts are connected by and to shared traumatic experience in the Dominican Republic, which is woven into the fabric of their migrant stories. My own definition of traumatic experience within Díaz’s texts is informed by this generalized expansion within which the trauma framework is “no longer confined to the clinic it has now become embedded in popular culture” (63). Yuniór’s narrative voice therefore ‘breaks the silence’ as a type of therapeutic interjection. His *testimonio* is a movement toward recovery that simultaneously recognizes that trauma is trifold: psychological, historical and political (67, 72). In keeping with the reading of Yuniór’s narrative position as a *testimonio*, his storytelling is also part of his confrontation with the trauma of survival. In the act of surviving, and in telling the story of that survival, there is a trace of trauma. As Cathy Caruth¹⁷ argues, trauma exists both in having confronted death and in surviving when others have perished; the repetition of the story therein becomes “the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival*” (25, italics original). In detailing the specific events of their family, Yuniór also tells a large socio-historical narrative of the Dominican Republic, a place where escaping the violence of the Trujillo dictatorship is an accomplishment. When Yuniór tells the stories of those who escaped, he repeats these narratives as a way to claim his own survival, as justification for his life. Telling Oscar’s family’s story in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* therefore provides an opening through which Yuniór can pull his own narrative while simultaneously reconciling his own successful migration out of the Dominican Republic.

Yuniór’s struggle with obtaining and maintaining romantic and platonic intimacy are also linked to “incomprehensibility of survival” that Caruth places at the center of the Freudian death drive (25). According to Caruth’s reading of the death drive, the trauma arises not in the death itself, but in the difficulty of awakening to life after a death has occurred. Yuniór’s telling of the multi-generational, multi-country story of a single family exposes his sense of delayed trauma as he struggles to forgive himself for being alive. In the opening section of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the story is introduced as a *zafa*, or counter-spell, which frames Yuniór’s post-death narrative as an amulet to guard against future traumatic experience. The *zafa* is difficult to maintain,

¹⁷ “Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals.”

however. As is evident in his struggle to forgive himself and maintain intimate relationships, we see that history continues to reverberate in and through the bodies of those who have survived. It may be impossible for Yuniór to forgive himself for surviving when others around him have died, but his confrontation with survival does provide an opening to face the traumatic experience that has shaped his life.

Yuniór is physically and emotionally molded by what Walkerdine, Olsvold and Rudberg¹⁸ call “embodied knowing,” wherein traumatic historical experience “is embodied in a way that cannot be spoken but is nevertheless transmitted down generations as embodied experiences” (273). Even unarticulated traumatic histories shape Yuniór’s body and determine the ways in which he is preoccupied with his own and others’ physicality. Second-generation characters like Yuniór and Oscar grow up in households where even silences about the past are palpable; in what is unspoken, they gain acute awareness of the conditions that have driven their families out of the Dominican Republic and have produced the subsequent pain of exile. In these everyday silences, memories of burnings, beatings, rape, poverty, and starvation remain, held within their mothers’ bodies and passed on to their sons and daughters. Mico-histories persist, slowly revealing themselves as Oscar and Yuniór dig into the past. In the daily interactions that Yuniór so attentively represents, “historical events are experienced and transmitted at once in large historical narratives and as small stories that get enacted in relationships” (273). The political history of the Dominican Republic is not an abstraction, but an influential component in shaping the contemporary experiences of second-generation characters, their bodies and psyches marked in ways that are demonstrably passed from generation to generation. As Ramírez¹⁹ argues, the Dominican Republic’s “pull is strong enough to force many diaspora subjects to ponder and even relive the various traumas that led them or their ancestors to migrate in the first place” (387).

In Yuniór’s re-telling of his childhood, we read the testimony of a man determined to understand and come to terms with the ways that the past has acted upon

¹⁸ “Researching Embodiment and Intergenerational Trauma using the work of Davoine and Gaudilliere: History walked in the door.”

¹⁹ “Great Men’s Magic: charting hyper-masculinity and supernatural discourses of power in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.”

him. This preoccupation with filling the silences of exile, facing the *paginas en blanco*, is related to Yuniór's quest to know himself. In his interpretive and historically fluid narrations, we are reminded of Stuart Hall,²⁰ who states, "we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity,' without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'" (225). In the silence, there is a story. The 'uniqueness' to which Hall refers cannot be extracted from the experience of being colonized and the ways in which the colonizer's "categories of knowledge" have the power to make citizens of the colonized country see themselves as Others. In Yuniór's experience with diaspora and citizenship, Otherness is therefore present as an internalization even before the act of migration (225, 226, 235). In the experiences of colonization and exile such internalizations manifest as forms of psychological trauma, the trauma of what Edward Said²¹ pinpoints as "the perilous territory of not-belonging" (140).

In an attempt to articulate these various ways of not-belonging, to fill past and present *paginas en blanco*, and negotiate the position of Otherness, Yuniór's narration circles around various traumatic situations as he tells and re-tells a story from multiple perspectives. In "Otravida, Otravez," for example, Yuniór tells the story of his father's second family through the eyes of his second wife. In *Drown* we hear the 'same' story from another perspective as Yuniór witnesses the unraveling of his mother's life in "Aguantando." In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* Yuniór insists on retracing Oscar's notebooks, letters, and his own historical notes to unearth Belicia's story as though it will provide insight into the events that have unfurled across their own lives. Yuniór's focus on recounting the de León-Cabal family story in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, his own childhood in *Drown*, and every failed relationship in *This is How You Lose Her* allows us recognize that, for him, the past continues to be located in the present (Wakerdine, Osvold and Rudberg, 293). In his obsession with the archives of memory and in locating others' alternative histories, Yuniór attempts to more completely understand himself. His narratives explore how it is possible to dwell within the present while learning from, but refusing to be determined by, the trappings of family legacy.

²⁰ "Cultural Identity and Diaspora"

²¹ "Reflections on Exile"

Chapter Three

Migration, Silence, and Secrecy

For the characters within Díaz's texts, trauma resides in the repetition of the past, in the act of survival, and also in the experience of migration. I contend that the political impetus for exile, the act of migration itself, and the experience of living within the United States as a migrant are all experiences that, within Díaz's texts, are marked as traumatic.²² Yuniór's family and the de León-Cabral family are part of a transmigrant group whose exodus from the Dominican Republic is diasporic in nature. There has been much critical discussion surrounding the use and meaning of the term diaspora, and I choose to adopt Michael Samers'²³ definition wherein diaspora/diasporic is reserved for those individuals who have been dispersed over a wide range of space away from the home country who then uphold differential identities within the country of settlement while maintaining a longing for a real or imagined homeland (288). This definition of diaspora is linked to the distinctly Dominican embodiment of transmigrant identity, wherein "Dominican identity formation remains of process of mediation and harmonizing to produce a multifaceted and resilient identity that challenges notions of identity in the native culture and the new culture as well" (Bonilla, 204).²⁴ The Dominicans presented in Díaz's texts have not necessarily assimilated into the culture of the United States, but are instead part of Dominican-American communities that continue to uphold traditions of the home country. The experience of being marked as Other within the United States keep these characters in a form of exile, forever outside of the dominant culture of their adopted homeland, even after establishing citizenship. This same experience of

²² There is much to be said about the ways that the past becomes vibrantly alive in Díaz's work, much of which rests upon the necessity of delving deep into one's personal, familial and socio-cultural past in order to understand the current moment. These texts are investing in mining the layers of stories produced by previous generations, even if some of those narratives remain unspoken. In future dealings-with of these same texts would ideally involve a conversation about the use of magical realism as a mechanism for rich storytelling and garnering a deeper understanding of the present moment, especially for second-generation characters like Oscar, Lola, and Yuniór; Oscar's obsession with fantasy is not far-removed from the historic tradition of magical realism. For more on this topic, see: Hanna; López-Calvo.

²³ *Migration*.

²⁴ In the wake of shifting communication technologies, the general experience of migration has also changed; as Sagás and Molina suggest, "migration is now visualized (under the optic of transnationalism) as a multilevel, multinational phenomenon that encompasses a complex web of interconnected locations" wherein the notions of 'host' and 'sending' societies have begun to lose meaning (4). For Dominican transmigrants, "there is a sentiment, a longing to return, a desire to be home that pushes Dominicans to visit the country constantly," movement which is motivated by a range of economic, social, and political factors (7).

Otherness, secrecy, and unspoken history propel both Oscar and Yuniór to more deeply explore the traumatic socio-political narratives of their families. Accordingly, it is impossible to understand the current moment without searching into the past held between the two countries.

Silences mark many of the primary narratives. In Díaz's books, the open spaces between characters are as definitive as the words that pass between them, and what remains unspoken creates space for an alternative narratives and speculation. Unable to tell portions of his own life story, Yuniór is preoccupied with filling the gaps within the de León-Cabral family story in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The de León-Cabral family therefore functions as a platform upon which Yuniór can work through questions of migration, masculinity, and trauma without continuing the interrogation into his own past. By refusing to reveal his identity for a large portion of the book, Yuniór deflects attention away from himself, focusing, instead, on filling in others' stories. In so doing, he gives particular attention to Belicia and Oscar's narratives, the two characters most dramatically marked as outcasts. Unlike Yuniór, Belicia and Oscar have endured multiple instances of torture in the name of forbidden love, refusing to give up the objects of their desire until forced by exile or death. Yuniór not only tries to comprehend their *paginas en blanco*, but also uses them as models to understand alternative ways of loving and moving through the two, interconnected worlds of the Dominican Republic and the United States.

The silence surrounding migration is an additional point of trauma the Dominican-American characters within Díaz's collection. Yuniór focuses on satisfying narrative gaps, whereas Belicia refuses to articulate anything about her past in the Dominican Republic, Yuniór's mother will not speak about her emotional and physical abandonment in the wake of Ramón's exodus, and the other male characters are expected to remain stoic pillars of masculinity. Silence invariably colors the migration experience across generations and borders. In *This is How You Lose Her*, the story "Invierno" recounts the emotional and physical space of migration as one heavy with solitude for Yuniór, Rafa, and their mother. Though their father has already adapted to his life in the United States, the five-year separation that he's had from his family and the barriers of language, culture, climate, and race, generate a zone of isolation in which he forces them

to reside. Refusing to take any of his family out of the house, Ramón makes their first confrontation with the United States a dismal one; it is a place where they are unable to have friends, go in the snow, eat traditional food, or speak the language. This sense of separateness and distance from the rest of the world permeates the entire experience of migration for their family; for them, the “world was frozen solid” and not just because of the rapidly-falling snow (125). The boys and their mother are trapped in their apartment in the projects with a father they don’t know, in a frigid environment, unable to communicate with the white children who wave to them through the glass. Ramón refuses to teach any of them English, announcing, “you’ll go out when I say you’re ready” (127). When they try to practice English he tells them that he “can’t understand a word” they’re saying and that “the average woman can’t learn English,” proclamations that silence his wife and shame his children (128).

For Yunior and his family, the general experience of migration as heavy with silence, shame, and isolation is connected to Ramón’s new role in their lives. No longer is the patriarch of their family a ghostly figure who may never appear to save them from the Dominican Republic, but an all-too-real man. Yunior explains in *Drown*’s “Negocios,” that his father’s “absence was a seamless thing” during their childhood in the Dominican Republic (199). Ramón’s invisibility had spanned the expanse of Yunior’s youth, a moment without a beginning. His presence, however, marks the end of an autonomous, though impoverished, portion of Yunior’s childhood, and causes several layers of familial upheaval. Suddenly, after years of abandonment, Ramón materializes as a real man, one with strong rules regarding how his sons *should* and *will* behave. Not only must they obey him, but they must also migrate to the United States. Once their father has arrived, Yunior and Rafa are forced to conform to his dictates while simultaneously trying to understand the new country in which they find themselves. Their migrant experience is therefore bound to comprehending the role of a father, *this* particular father. After having their lives defined by shape of his absence for so many years, Ramón’s presence is full of unforeseen difficulty for his sons.

Yunior and Rafa’s markedly divergent reactions to Ramón are indicative of their respective positions within the larger Dominican community: Rafa will play by the rules of Dominican masculinity and Yunior will try to play along and subsequently fail. During

their early months in the United States, Rafa is able to please Ramón by remaining silent and obedient – transformed from his unruly island self – and will continue to assimilate as the secondary patriarch of their family. Yuniór, by contrast, “couldn’t perform” in the United States, his obedience impotent under their father’s gaze. Post-migration, the once-deferent son is unable to remain quiet, tie his shoes, control his hair, or stay inside the house (130). As we witness in his varying performance of masculinity, young Yuniór is unable to comfortably conform to his father’s demands or to those of the larger Dominican culture around him. As becomes apparent in Yuniór’s ambivalent and fearful relationship with his father, Ramón represents the greater dictates of hegemonic *tiguere* masculinity²⁵ that Yuniór learns to mimic, enforce, and then stumblingly reject. Rafa, by contrast, is a *tiguere* at heart, and obeys Ramón “with a scrupulousness he had never shown anybody” (140). Though Rafa eventually regains the position as patriarchal force of the family, his desire to understand and embody Ramón’s breed of masculinity temporarily renders him a silent disciple of his father’s rule.

In “Invierno,” Yuniór’s hair functions as synecdoche for the rest of him, an unruly mass that cannot be combed down, a kink that confronts his family and reminds them of their origins. To control his son’s afro, his mark of difference, Ramón takes Yuniór to the barbershop, a strictly male space where he demands the barber “shave it all off” (132). In a scene that renders him completely vulnerable, Ramón directs the process as Yuniór “watched the clippers plow through [his] hair, watched [his] scalp appear, tender and defenseless” (132). Away from the rest of their family, outside the confines of a safe domestic space, Ramón has taken Yuniór into the masculine outside world and exposed him under the watchful gaze of other men. In the process of shaving his head, Ramón has emasculated Yuniór and rendered him powerless. Yuniór experiences this act as an intrusion; the shears have forcefully shaped him, but not into a form that he understands or desires to embody. Ramón has demonstrated his dominance over Yuniór, rendering him voiceless and unable to control his own body. Yuniór subsequently explains his visceral reaction to his father’s violation: “I was sick to my stomach; I didn’t want him to shave it but what could I have said to my father? I didn’t have the words” (132). Not only has Ramón has stripped his son naked to the cold American winter, making him

²⁵ I will discuss this concept in more detail later

vulnerable while other men look on, he has also quelled Yuniór's ability to speak back. Finally, Yuniór is silenced, truly impotent, and ready for masculinist indoctrination; Ramón has spoken for him, dictating his desires.

As they drive home from the barbershop, Yuniór stares out the window, fantasizing about disappearing. His father asks him if he likes black women, speaking openly of his own love of *negras*, shamelessly admitting his infidelities. His queer desires hidden within him, Yuniór narrates, "I wanted to blurt out that I didn't like girls in any denomination" (133). Rather than admit any sort of homosexual desire, he gives the acceptable answer, knowing that Ramón will approve when he says "Oh yes" (133). Yuniór's lie about his interest in women elicits a rare smile from Ramón, the only approval he receives through the entire story. Only in silencing himself and redefining his sexuality is Yuniór able to receive positive reinforcement. His "head aching with [his] desire to communicate," Yuniór's preoccupation with conforming to the dictates of Dominican-American culture is created by the isolation of his early years in the United States, the seclusion of his youth, and the anxiety surrounding his relationship to Ramón (141). Yuniór's transformation into an 'acceptable' Dominican-American man, however, comes at the cost of remaining true to the queerly sensitive man he actually feels himself to be.

Dominican Models of Masculinity

Over the course of Díaz's collection, it becomes clear that Yuniór's negotiation of masculinity and his navigation of intimate relationships – familial and romantic – is impossible to disconnect from the rape culture and homosexual panic woven into the fabric of life within the Dominican Republic. Even in the United States, the Dominicans and Dominican-Americans Díaz describes are never truly free from the collective experience and memory of colonialism and dictatorship. These traumatic experiences ultimately reverberate within their bodies and psyches, shaping self-presentation and gender performance. Beyond life in the Dominican Republic, Díaz's collection is preoccupied with the points of discord between expectations within home country and

those of the country of migration – and the narrative preoccupation with masculinity functions as a demonstration of this tension.

As Yunior’s ever-shifting gender performance demonstrates, locating an acceptable and comfortable embodiment of masculinity is complicated by his movement through different countries and social spaces, each laden with complicated standards for how a man should act. Within the United States, for example, Yunior is frequently classified as a ‘typical’ Dominican man, a label that is primarily negative. Though Yunior refers to the distinct norms of Dominican men on numerous occasions, he also indicates an ambivalent identification with Dominican masculinity, undulating between embracing and fearing what it means to be a man within his own community. Yunior classifies himself as Dominican while also feeling constrained by the expectations of what that definition entails. When women call him a ‘typical Dominican man,’ we alternately witness his anxiety about, or silent acceptance of, this title, laden as it is with depictions of the Dominican notion of *tiguere*, *hombres de familiar*, *sucios*, and *mujeriegos*. Non-Dominicans, by contrast, struggle to pinpoint his racial origin and linguistic background; his masculinity also appears out of sync with various models of ‘the new man’ within the contemporary United States.

There are several distinctly Dominican masculinities that are key to understanding the culture of which Yunior is a part. The *tiguere*, a masculine thematic across Díaz’s books, is a well-known ‘type’ of Dominican man described in detail by Christian Krohn-Hansen:²⁶ a man should be “both astute and socially intelligent; both courageous and smart; both cunning and convincing; and a gifted talker who gets out of most situations in a manner that is acceptable to others” (109). Though the *tiguere* may be the most well-known Dominican breed of masculinity, it is also fairly malleable in practice. For example, according to Krohn-Hansen, any man could begin his adulthood as a virile *tiguere*, later become engaged in a supposedly-monogamous relationship where he is seen as a *hombre de familiar* (a man who provides for his wife and children), while acting as a *mujeriego* (a womanizer focused on sexual conquest) when he is out in the street (116). In keeping with these mixed and, at times, contradictory classifications, the original *tiguere* is a man whose masculinity may transcend the usual limits of male types,

²⁶ “Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans: ‘The Dominican Tiger.’”

his actions usually morally ambiguous in nature (121). As is stated within the extensive historical footnotes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the formative period for the *tiguere* type was during the reign of Trujillo, and has since become a type emblematic within the nation as a whole, where it is “produced, reproduced, and modified by ordinary people in everyday life” (110). The Dominican *tiguere* and discourse of hyper-masculinity are not simply island-bound but also situated in American diasporic communities. As Ramírez argues, Dominican patriarchal power systems and “the suffocating pressure of performative masculinity” shape these characters’ self-perceptions long after they have situated in the United States (384).

Across these three books, we witness various examples of what it is to ‘be a man’ in primarily Dominican-American communities. These depictions reserve little room for alternative identificatory practices, or even for forms of sensitive masculinity. In Oscar and Yunior’s communities, masculinity is patrolled both privately and publicly, and is produced by a strict set of codes that are translated from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Though, at least in his adolescence and early adulthood, Yunior seems to conform to the rules of Dominican/Dominican-American manhood, his preoccupation with the proper exhibition of masculinity betrays his uneven identification with the norms he so deftly attempts to follow. In Yunior’s descriptions of Oscar we are able to locate his fears about the queerness in himself, and the threat of social rejection associated with alternative masculinities. His anxiety about his own masculinity allows Yunior to pinpoint the discomfort that outsiders like Oscar experience—and produce—within the Dominican communities of which they are a part. For example, in his initial description of Oscar, Yunior remarks:

Couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses...sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded (20).

Even in the negative forms within this description, we are able to recognize some of the rules for the Dominican man: he should be able to gamble, play sports, dance, hustle, rap,

spit game, and understand music and business. He must look good without appearing feminine, he should straighten his hair, shave his face, and stay fit. A Dominican man needs to maintain his looks without seeming gay – he must uphold the illusion that style, musculature, and not-black-not-Puerto-Rican hair are simply written into one’s Dominican DNA. In his narrative choices, Yuniór repeatedly affirms Oscar’s difference while upholding the illusion that he is himself normatively Dominican. Yuniór’s points of preoccupation with Oscar – his marked difference, physically and emotionally, his curse – are the same points that threaten Yuniór’s own carefully-crafted masculinity. Though he is obsessed with telling a version of Oscar’s story, their friendship also threatens to reveal Yuniór’s own queer difference.

Yuniór did not begin his life as a *tiguere*, but has instead learned to mask himself as that type of man, a situation that contributes to his preoccupation and identification with Oscar. The beginning of his self-obscuring process is evident in *Drown*, for example, where Yuniór remains silently complicit with the violence, aggression, and womanizing of his father and brother and, later, begins to mimic these behaviors. In Yuniór’s description of himself and the men in his family, however, there remain lingering doubts about the function and form of acceptable masculinity. After years of being called a weakling by his male relatives, a turning point occurs for Yuniór in *Drown*’s “Aguantando,” when he realizes the resemblance between himself and his father. During a moment of fantasy, he pictures himself looking into Ramón’s face and seeing that “his dark unsmiling eyes were my own” (70). Fearful of his own potential queerness, Yuniór searches for parallels between his own sensitive masculinity and the *tiguere* model exhibited by the men in his family. In his childhood, Yuniór is often chastised for acting soft, and he quickly learns to hide the sensitive parts of himself behind a macho mask. Whenever Yuniór begins to cry, either his brother or father step in to chastise him; these rejoinders begin a process of change for Yuniór. He must no longer be the “pussy” that these men believe him to be—he must locate himself within his father (*Drown*, 13). In an attempt to silence the vulnerable, feminine, queer parts of himself, Yuniór mimics the breed of masculinity he sees in the men around him. In order to differentiate himself from ‘freaks’ and ‘fags,’ Yuniór becomes hyper-masculine. Supporting the illusion of his Dominican masculinity is not just about musculature and macho affect, it is also about

sexual prowess. Repeatedly sabotaging his most intimate relationships in the process, over the course of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This is How You Lose Her* Yunion mirrors his brother and father by having sex with as many women as possible. This is a theme that Yunion reiterates in his description of Trujillo's breed of *tiguere* masculinity, in his observations about his brother, Rafa, and, later, in his commentary about himself.

In the "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Yunion begins the story with this repeating theme, "Your girl catches you cheating...She could have caught you with one sucia, she could have caught you with two, but you're a totally batshit cuero who didn't ever empty his e-mail trashcan, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still! Fifty fucking girls? God-damn" (179). When he tries to articulate why he was so unfaithful, it is as though cheating is engrained in his blood, in his brain; Yunion explains, "And of course you swore you wouldn't do it. You swore you wouldn't. You swore you wouldn't. And you did" (179). As with Oscar's sister Lola in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunion sabotages love – "love, real love, is not so easily shed" – in order to see like a *tiguere* (179). Cheating, to him, is safer than staying in love, less fearful than actually giving himself to someone else.

Oscar's obsession with true love, however, challenges the model that Yunion attempts to follow. When he moves in with Oscar at Rutgers, Yunion describes Oscar's preoccupation with women, "The real irony was that you never met a kid who wanted a girl so fucking bad. I mean, shit, I thought *I* was into females, but no one, and I mean *no one*, was into them the way Oscar was" (173). Unable to flirt – "Oscar's idea of G was to talk about role-playing games" – and always immediately and completely enamored, his masculinity challenges Yunion's Dominican rules regarding how men interact with women (174). Refusing to see girls as simple sex objects, Oscar becomes an object of ridicule in Washington Heights and at Rutgers. Yunion again explains Oscar's failed masculinity through the *tiguere* lens:

Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to

be pulling in the bitches with both hands. Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it (24).

Oscar is problematically marked by his desire to lock himself away with sci-fi and his refusal to exit the domestic space of the home or the dorm, which also relegates him to the an outcast position.²⁷ Such strict gender norming is reinforced by both men and women; males undergo a socialization process that orients them toward static gender constructs that are first outlined during mother-child interactions and later reinforced through other social paradigms (de Moya, 73). What results is a totalitarian image of dominant masculinity so commonplace within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. There is a clear line between the house as a feminine space and the street as a masculine space, each following a different set of strict gender-codes. For example, the ‘house’ values of “honesty, fidelity and trust” are not necessarily followed in the street, wherein Dominican masculine acceptance rests upon the notion of the “inherent unfaithfulness of men” which is then linked to an emphasis on male virility (de Moya, 77, 79). Within these spaces, men who seem to embody a hegemonic masculinity—like Rafa, Ramón, and, later, Yunior—are asked to “produce and reproduce as a ritual the patriarchal power game of masculinities, primarily on the basis of sexual orientation” (de Moya, 99).

It is against this standard of *tiguere* masculinity that all other men are forced to measure themselves. From an early age, Yunior is socialized to believe that he must “define, patrol and preserve” the standards of ‘normalcy’ for men, historically presented as the antithesis of women (de Moya, 99). In Yunior’s relationship patterns with strong Latinas and in his prolific cheating, Díaz’s stories enforce de Moya’s assertion that the discourses of traditional Dominican masculinity are at a crisis point. The way that Yunior performs his version of *tiguere* Dominican masculinity is not compatible with his desire to have deeper intimate relationships. In order to actually maintain intimate relationships with the women he loves, Yunior must learn the ‘female’ art of emotional vulnerability

²⁷ Yunior describes Oscar’s propensity for scholastic versus street-smarts by remarking, “You really want to know what being an X-man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mama mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (22). Yunior fabricates an image of Oscar as a completely monstrous freak marked most dramatically not by his skin color, afro, glasses, or obesity – but also by his bookishness. Though it is at least mildly acceptable for Oscar’s sister, Lola, to be “one of those overachiever chicks who run all the organizations in college and wear suits to meetings. Was the president of her sorority, the head of S.A.L.S.A. and co-chair of Take Back the Night. A femme-matador who spoke perfect stuck-up Spanish,” it is both unacceptable and unattractive for Oscar to be obsessed with fantasy genres, nerd cultures, or academics (169).

while maintaining sexual fidelity. Realizing his ability to change eventually allows Yuniór to locate a new model of masculinity, even if he finds it in the final pages of *This is How You Lose Her* as he explains that the act of recording his machismo, his indiscretions, his cheating, becomes another beginning in itself, one that “feels like hope, like grace” (217).

Race and Reading Yuniór’s Body

Whereas Yuniór views the subtle rules of his community as distinctly and problematically fixed, these same rules remain nearly invisible to those who fall outside of his specific immigrant community. Though his ethnicity in many ways defines him, Yuniór is painfully aware that, to many people within the United States, his identity has been simplified as Afro-Latino or Hispanic, broad terms that erase much of his specific experience. Because of his dark skin and use of Spanglish, Yuniór is often misread, especially by women, and must therefore choose how to either deny or conform to these various other identities. In Dominican-American society, Yuniór feels confined to certain enactments of masculinity, and within the domain of his immediate family and friends it is difficult for him to present varied versions of himself. However, as a migrant within the greater fabric of American society, his ethnicity becomes more fluid, though not necessarily liberating. As a man of color in “a contemporary U.S. ghetto” even Yuniór’s options for being misread are limiting (*Oscar Wao*, 22).

These instances of mistaken identity present Yuniór with the choice to inhabit others’ fantasies about who he may or may not be. Though these scenarios often leave Yuniór questioning himself, such shape-shifting situations are also transformative because they allow him to step into alternative identities. As Di Iorio Sandín²⁸ argues, Latino characters like Yuniór often feel rejected by both white and black America, choosing to don a mask that helps them mourn the loss of whiteness, blackness, and the Latino identity of the home country (103). The triple consciousness he feels as he is alternately classified across various races and ethnicities allows Yuniór to experience a multiplicity of perspectives while feeling comfortably situated in none. Yuniór wears “the

²⁸ *Killing Spanish*.

mask of machismo” in order to successfully navigate society, even if he feels suffocated by its confines (123). Whereas Di Iorio Sandín argues that the “seductions and pressure of machismo” cripple his potential as a ‘new Latino male,’ I argue that, as Yuniór tries on new masks, he indulges his desire to locate alternative ways of moving through the world (120).

Before he can locate a new breed of masculinity, Yuniór must move through multiple masculinities that, in various ways, confine his identity and dictate the ways he interacts with women. Díaz’s early short story from *Drown*, “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie,” is explicitly concerned with the race and sexuality of the narrator and the women he pursues. In this story, Yuniór uses his interactions with women of various races to create a ‘dating guide’ for young men of color in the outer boroughs of New York. This guide is less about dating and more about race, class, and the pain of mutual objectification. Labeling these girls only by their race, Yuniór reveals the clear color lines that have been drawn in his head, school and neighborhood. Though he names his own stereotypes, Yuniór realizes his own role as a brownboy, himself becoming a fantasy object as an indeterminately raced man upon which the girls alternately project their desires and their own raced anxieties. The story masquerades as a how-to guide, but what it reveals is not a roadmap about dating but, rather, provides insight into the color and gender-lines already constructed in Yuniór’s early adolescent mind. The narrative is not actually about intimacy, but about how to obscure portions of one’s identity in order to have sex, how to alternately render illegible or emphasize versions of one’s ethnicity or linguistic heritage to craft a more ‘desirable’ version of oneself.

For each of these dating scenarios, the first steps are always the same, and involve hiding distinctly ‘third world’ or Dominican/immigrant trappings from view. Yuniór’s awareness of his race and ethnicity may be figured in a slightly different manner with each girl, but his position as a poor immigrant boy from the projects never ceases to be shameful. Regardless of a girl’s race, the first directive is the same: “clear the government cheese from the refrigerator” (143). Yuniór knows that, if he were to leave the pictures from his childhood on full display and allow the government cheese to remain, he would make himself vulnerable to ridicule as a poor, third-world immigrant.

This position within American society has the function of ‘blackening’ him beyond the surface of his skintone. As Moreno²⁹ argues, “Like many Dominican immigrants, Yuniór is aware that his blackness, as well as his class and ethnicity, marginalizes him in the United States. In hiding the photo [from his childhood], Yuniór symbolically erases the racial difference that marks him as an ‘Other’ in the United States” (n.p.). His Otherness, therefore, spans beyond race, Dominican identification, or linguistics, reaching into the way that he is also marked by his socio-economic position within the United States – a position that further racializes him.

The color of Yuniór’s skin is a point of focus in his identity formation both in the Dominican Republic and the United States; in both places, he knows that his ‘blackness’ matters. In the Dominican Republic, to be ‘black’ is associated with Haitians,³⁰ a negative connotation repeated in all three of Díaz’s texts. In the United States, black means being labeled as African American. “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” provides insight into the ways in which Yuniór and his dates have internalized various breeds of racism and how these internalizations dictate the flow of desire between the various parties involved. Tellingly, the whitegirls are the dates Yuniór describes first, “the ones you want the most” (145). In longing for whitegirls, Yuniór seeks to ‘whiten’ himself, and as Moreno argues, “the whitegirl metaphorizes whiteness as a sexual appetite” while simultaneously shifting Yuniór’s own racial identification (6). Yuniór’s self-loathing becomes clear in his directives for interacting with a whitegirl: “tell her you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because in truth, you love them more than you love your own. She’ll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you’ve never been to Spain, say, I like you. You’ll sound smooth” (147, 148). When a whitegirl’s conflation of his identity may mean sex, a form of entry into her world, a kind of acceptance, Yuniór consents to her ignorance about his linguistic and geographic origins – but not without realizing his own self-loathing in the same breath. In his love of her features, he unabashedly rejects his own dark skin and Afro-Latino heritage, allowing his Spanglish to perform a charade of European exoticism. Yuniór explains that, though one is more likely to have sex with these whitegirls – “A white girl might just give it up right then.

²⁹ “Debunking Myths, Destabilizing Identities: A Reading of Junot Díaz’s ‘How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie.’”

³⁰ For more on race and the Dominican Republic, see: Kunsá, Torres-Saillant, Duany, Sagás.

Don't stop her" – the cost for doing so is also one's own identity (147). The deceptive silence that permeates their interactions allows Yuniór to passively renounce his ethnicity, a rejection that is worthy if it means gaining a whitegirl's approval. Again, Yuniór has silenced himself in order to participate in a system dominated by hegemonic masculinity, where having sex is key to reinforcing the strength of one's gender performance.

In each of the interactions he describes in his how-to guide, varying degrees of racialized self-consciousness also emanates from the girls he tries to pursue. He cautions about expecting sex: "usually it won't work this way. Be prepared" (148). He readies his how-to audience by outlining the self-loathing the girls feel for themselves, the disappointment with being in London Terrace, on a plastic-covered couch, with a Dominican boy. These girls feel shame about themselves, their race, their bodies, their hair, and they lash out at him, "you're the only kind of guy who asks me out, she will say," while pulling away from him, "you and the blackboys" (148). As with many of Díaz's stories, these final moments are thick with emotional distress and anxiety about belonging; "you will not know what to say" over and over again (148). Like the narrator himself, these girls have been reduced to racial and sexual categories, their identities flattened and voices constrained by the limitations of social norms.

Yuniór's narration indicates that the best way to cope with her rejection is to withdraw. He instructs the audience, presumably other men like him, to "say nothing" (149). Ending as it does with a scene of foreclosed intimacy, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" shows the reader that, in Yuniór's early sexual encounters, the ultimate tone is one of pained silence. As with many of Yuniór's intimacies, at the end of a story purportedly about sexual conquest the final note is of unarticulated, aching loss. Rather than try to connect with these girls, to show them his own parallel vulnerabilities, Yuniór instructs, "let her go without too much of a good-bye. She won't want it. During the next hour the phone will ring. You will be tempted to pick it up. Don't...Don't go downstairs. Don't fall asleep. It won't help" (149). At the end of this guide, we are left not with a sense of possibility, but with silence, our dating guide left alone in front of the television, helpless and inarticulate.

Queer Silences

The silences that permeate Díaz's three collections circulate most prominently around matters of intimacy, race, and trauma, spanning the geographic and social distance between the Dominican Republic and the United States. There are silences within these collections that also speak to Yuniór's own queerness and anxiety about the stability of his machismo persona. Though he often appears articulate on matters of sexuality, Yuniór's ambivalent identification with heteronormative Dominican masculinity, difficulty in maintaining a monogamous heterosexual relationship, and focus on outsider characters like Oscar, speak to certain complexities laden within his own identity. As previously mentioned, Yuniór's affinity for describing outcasts is indicative of his own queerness, which he struggles to mask through the aggressively heterosexual attitude he adopts. His preoccupation with Oscar's narrative marks an identification that extends beyond the typical confines of a heterosexual friendship. Oscar becomes something more for Yuniór, a proxy for telling his own narrative, a 'freakish' manifestation of himself. Yuniór is able to work through his own anxieties about masculinity, ostracization, feminization, and homosexuality by focusing on Oscar, a man often accused of queerness as measured against the mores of Dominican society. Yuniór begins to address his own carefully masked difference through Oscar, who functions as a catalyst for Yuniór's storytelling, a means by which he can work through his own position as an outcast, and a model for alternative ways loving. Near the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yuniór credits Oscar, or, specifically, Oscar's death, with the beginning of a shift: "Took ten years to the day, went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while—no Lola, no me, no nothing—until I finally woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win" (325).

Though he uses Oscar's story as a vehicle for his own self-reconciliation, it is Yuniór's preoccupation with his friend that allows him to wipe the coke off his face and try to be "a new man you see, a new man, a new man" (326). The question at the center of these texts, however, is whether that transformation is even possible for Yuniór. Oscar, who dies in his quest for love, is Yuniór's only model of difference. To become 'a new

man,' he must locate his own, uncharted embodiment of masculinity, however difficult. Under the surface of Yuniór's macho philandering is an intense yearning for intimacy and vulnerability. Within these stories, too, we may locate a certain anxiety about his interpersonal relationships with other men. Yuniór's 'boys,' his father, brother, and the community of Dominican and Latino men surrounding them, generally ascribe to *tiguere* forms of masculinity. Yuniór's most intimate relationships, however, reveal that he does not so easily fit into the norms of his home community.

Yuniór's anxiety about his own queerness is also marked by his relationship with his gay best friend, Beto. In the titular story of *Drown*, Yuniór describes Beto: "he's a pato now but two years ago we were friends" (91). Though this story is, in part, focused on Yuniór's feeling of entrapment in the New Jersey projects, it is also centered on the way that he is held hostage by his assumed heterosexual identity. After describing the way that Beto and his father used to watch heterosexual porn together as their only point of connection, Yuniór and Beto are in the basement watching the same videos, on the same couch. During this scene, Yuniór silently allows Beto to give him a handjob, during which he explains, "I kept my eyes on the television, too scared to watch. I came right away, smearing the plastic sofa covers. My legs started shaking and suddenly I wanted out" (104). Yuniór then reveals his fear about the queering of his masculinity, how he couldn't bring himself to go out of the 'feminine' domestic sphere and into the street or the mall with Beto, into the masculine realm. Yuniór won't leave the house or meet Beto out the next day; when his mother "pestered" him, Yuniór tells her to "leave me the fuck alone," refusing to tell her about the source of his anxiety (104). At home on a sporadic visit, his father "stirred himself from the couch to slap [Yuniór] down," Yuniór's refusal to speak punished by the semi-absent patriarch of his family.

Unable to talk to anyone about his relationship and sexual exchange with Beto, Yuniór hides himself away: "Mostly I remained in the basement, terrified that I would end up abnormal, a fucking pato, but he was my best friend and back then that mattered to me more than anything" (104). In these passages, we witness intimacy between Yuniór and Beto that is more pronounced than many of the other emotional exchanges he subsequently has with women, and most certainly more romantic and intense than with any other men. Later, Beto gives Yuniór a blowjob that Yuniór silently condones, the

subsequent moments more tender than any other after-sex scenes we witness with Yuniór. Beto lays his head in Yuniór's lap, and he explains, "I wasn't asleep or awake, but caught somewhere in between, rocked slowly back and forth the way surf holds junk against the shore, rolling it over and over" (105). In an almost womb-like image, Yuniór is comforted and still, held by a man who cares deeply for him.

"Drown" provides insight into Yuniór's quiet identification with marginal characters and the danger of alternative masculinities. As this story examines one of several homosexual experiences embedded within Yuniór's life-narrative, it makes readers acutely aware that his homosexual experience has the dangerous potential to sully his masculinity. To extract himself from this precarious position, Yuniór must actively distance himself from queerness. When Beto leaves for college, for example, Yuniór and his new boys drive through town late at night after going out to drink, smoke, and check out women. When they pass the local "fag bar" Yuniór recalls the way that his friends have pretended to pull a gun on men there while his boy leans his head out the window and yells "Fuck you!" and "eat me" into the night (103). In the next sentence, Yuniór says "Twice. That's it," at once verbally connecting and distancing himself to the "fags" who are loitering outside the bar (103). Yuniór's complicated relationship with Beto and to his own sexuality parallels his ambivalence about what type of man he believes himself to be. In Beto, he locates elements of the strong, sensitive protector he lacks, recalling the way his friend's "heavy voice...that cracked and made you think of uncles or grandfathers" could bring his mother from her room and Yuniór from the basement (91). Not only a father, uncle, or grandfather, Beto is also the caring brother for whom Yuniór longs. Rather than shame him for crying as Rafa would, when they get caught shoplifting "Beto didn't say a word, his face stretched out and gray, his hand squeezing mine, the bones in our fingers pressing together" (99). Whereas Rafa verbally and physically abuses Yuniór, Beto is at once masculine, stoic, sensitive, and willing to provide more tender and intimate sexual exchanges than we see between Yuniór and the women he pursues.

Yuniór's relationship with Beto and his anxiety about their homosexual interactions echo the experiences and emotions expressed in "Ysrael" (12). In this story, which opens *Drown*, Yuniór recounts finding and unmasking Ysrael, a boy whose face

has been eaten by pigs. Ysrael reappears later in the collection in a story told from his perspective, and acts as a mirror to Yuniór, a character with whom he identifies. Immediately prior to the scene wherein Rafa rips off Ysrael's mask, a rape of sorts, Yuniór is molested on the bus (12). When Yuniór sees Rafa violate Ysrael, he begins to cry. In a demonstration of the type of callousness that Yuniór later experiences with his own father, Rafa "watched for a moment. You, he said, are a pussy...Rafa spit. You have to get tougher. Crying all the time. Do you think our papi's crying? Do you think that's what he's been doing the last six years?" (13, 14). Rafa, like their father, epitomizes a certain type of masculinity that Yuniór aspires to emulate. However, while he seeks to mimic Rafa's *tiguere* attitude, Yuniór also feels hurt by the way his brother actively berates and humiliates him.

In "Ysrael," as in several of Díaz's later stories, Rafa is aggressively sexual, and provides a portrait of *tiguere* masculinity at work. Rafa and Yuniór are staying out in the country, where they share a bed, and Rafa tells his brother "When I get home, I'm going to go crazy – chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else's" (4). To Rafa, "who rarely said anything to [Yuniór] except Shut up, pendejo," women are property, either his or another man's (5). Yuniór is not going to "chinga" anyone's girl anytime soon, and he listens to Rafa's stories with pointed attention, as he tells Yuniór about "campo girls" who he'd "take...down to the dams to swim and if he was lucky they let him put it in their mouths or asses" (5). The sex he describes, without vaginal penetration, may be likened to the gay exchanges that Yuniór has later in the collection – and perhaps with the type of sex he experiences during his own *pagina en blanco*.

The role Yuniór plays for when his brother – when he's not crying like a "pussy" – is that of silent witness. While they are in bed together, Rafa goes on monologues where he talks "about tetas and chocas and leche and he'd talk without looking at me...I was too young to understand most of what he said, but I listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future" (6). Following the evolution of Yuniór's masculine persona, it is clear that what Rafa tells him *does* become useful in the future. In both *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *This is How You Lose Her*, he narrates the adult version himself as a "typical Dominican man: a sucio, an asshole" (5). Yuniór wants anything but to stand apart from other men; to be seen as anything but

‘typical’ would potentially implicate him in various queer desires and complicate the identity he has fabricated for himself. Refusing to recognize the queer parts of himself, however, forecloses the real intimacy that he so desires.

By seeking to present himself as a typical Dominican man in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for example, Yunior attempts to differentiate himself from Oscar, who he repeatedly describes as an atypical Dominican. In his opening introduction of Oscar he explains, “Our hero wasn’t one of those Dominican cats that everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock” (11). Throughout his adolescence and early adulthood Oscar is repeatedly marked in terms of difference, grouped in with “the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay” (265). In contrast, Yunior calls himself a “state school player” and stating the reality of his daily life in simple terms: “I had my job and the gym and my boys and my novia and of course I had my slutties” (173). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior neglects the parts of himself that are like Oscar, only briefly alluding to their shared literary cannon, revealing his own nerdiness by making sci-fi references that only another fanboy could produce.

Over the course of the novel, the similarities between these two men become increasingly evident. In the opening passages, Yunior calls Oscar a ‘pariguayo,’ that is, “anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls. The kid who don’t dance, ain’t got game, who lets people clown him—he’s the paraguayo” (20). Being labeled as a paraguayo is, according to Yunior, a curse that is difficult to overcome. However, Yunior is also afflicted with this same hex, as he later calls himself the ‘Watcher.’ In reference to the unknowns in the story, and to his own silences, Yunior remarks, “even your Watcher has his silences, his paginas en blanco” (149). Though Yunior may initially try to distance himself from Oscar, such linguistic parallels draw a connection between the position of these two men. Like Oscar the pariguayo, Yunior is forever distanced from the group by some undeniable aspect of his identity. Yunior repeatedly infers that his *paginas en blanco* set him apart from other men; his own queerness is a key component of this enforced silence.

Yunior acts the part of the macho even though he shares knowledge of all of Oscar's nerd culture, spends his youth being called a faggot, and has read the work of Oscar Wilde. In an attempt to construct his own difference from Oscar, Yunior uses his awareness of queer literature to create a barrier between himself and Oscar rather than using it as a point of connection. After Yunior's girlfriend leaves him because he has repeatedly cheated on her, he focuses his energy on his friend and begins 'Project Oscar,' during which he tries to enforce a strict running schedule in an effort to strip off Oscar's fatness, teach him some Dominican sexual prowess, and get him laid. As Machado Sáez³¹ argues, Project Oscar is actually about Yunior, an veiled effort to "purge the Otherness within himself" (546). Rather than opening up to Oscar about what it's like to feel like a freak, Yunior instead focuses on getting him to ascribe to a the breed of masculinity with which he has masked himself. When Oscar shuts down Yunior's plan to convert him into the quintessential Dominican man, Yunior begins to call him a "fat homo" "fag" or "pajaro" and allows his boys to call him 'Oscar Wao' a Dominicanized version of 'Oscar Wilde' (180).

Though Yunior allows others to label Oscar as queer, Yunior, however, does not want to leave Oscar's sexuality unsettled at the end of the novel. As Machado Sáez asserts, "Díaz shows that the project of domestication, of defining the authentic diasporic subject, requires the violent silencing of Oscar's queerness" (527). Yunior therefore accomplishes the ruse of heterosexuality by claiming that Oscar has lost his virginity to Ybón, an act that results in his death at the hands of Ybón's boyfriend, the Capitan. Yunior narrates this final act, Oscar's virginity loss, beating and death, as a means to neatly tie up the cycle of love and violence that has shaped the de León-Cabral family trajectory. Moreover, dictating his own version of Oscar's story allows Yunior to resolve Oscar's potential queerness, which is, of course, "tied to the threat which that identity represents to Yunior's own sexuality" (Machado Sáez, 548). He publicly condemns Oscar for the ways he is marked as different, but without him Yunior would lack means through which to divulge his own difference. For Yunior, allowing other characters to function as proxy for Yunior's own complex relationship to masculinity and sexuality

³¹ "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance."

creates a narrative distance that feels less like a personal interrogation. Oscar's existence causes Yuniór to question the roots of his *tiguere* masculinity and eventually understand that it is out of place in the contemporary American world in which he resides. Though Yuniór's later position as a writer, professor, and academic provides him with the vocabulary for articulating his complex masculinity and hybrid identity, he needs these other characters to provide the lens through which he eventually begins to comprehend himself.

Silence often functions as a form of isolation in Díaz's stories, though in *This is How You Lose Her*'s "Miss Lora," what remains unspoken plays a more complex role; silence is reformed as a point of connection. Containing similar undertones to "Drown," this later story, which examines Rafa's death and Yuniór's teenage sexual relationship with an older Dominicana, demonstrates the ways silence and outsider identification can propel intimate relationships. Again speaking in a distant second person, Yuniór's voice is detached as he intertwines his narrative of death, sex, and looming fears about the apocalypse. As Rafa dies, Yuniór cheats on his girlfriend, and his mother grieves, their house is punctuated with heavy silences. In this story, Yuniór's loss of virginity and his embodiment of masculinity become bound to the process of reconciling his brother's slow death from cancer. A playboy until he is too weak to fuck, Rafa's heightened sexuality functions as a formative force for Yuniór, who alternately reveres and feels disgusted by his brother's relationships with women.

Even after Rafa's death, his hegemonic masculinity continues to shape Yuniór's actions and sexuality; Rafa remains a voice in Yuniór's head. Rather than give his own appraisal of Miss Lora, Yuniór begins his narrative with Rafa's assessment: "I'd fuck her" (153). This pronouncement is directly followed by an explanation of Rafa's interjecting voice, as if it has sprung from the grave: "Your brother. Dead now a year and sometimes you still feel a fulgurating sadness over it" (153). The positioning of Miss Lora's living body and Rafa's corpse and disembodied voice creates a narrative situation within which it is impossible to disconnect the two. Of Rafa's deterioration, Yuniór explains, "when he finally became too feeble to run away he refused to talk to you or your mother...his last fucking days and he wouldn't say a word" (154). Oppressive silence and Rafa's immanent death color Yuniór's personal life; during Rafa's illness

Yunior has nightmares of war in the midst of everyday life, bombs exploding and “evaporating you” (155). Yunior wakes up biting his own tongue in terror, which, in turn, makes it difficult for him to speak (155).

Though others refuse to hear him, Miss Lora’s attentiveness connects the two of them, both physically and emotionally. When she touches his shoulder after listening to his dream, he begins to see past “how skinny she was, no culo, not titties, como un palito” (153). Like Yunior, an amateur weightlifter whose excessive lifting makes him into “a goddamn circus freak,” Miss Lora is “famous in the neighborhood...for her muscles” (156, 157). Though Yunior explains that her difference makes her sexy, he also describes her in masculine terms, “no hips whatsoever. No breasts, either, no ass,” that draw upon multiple levels of Yunior’s own queer desires (157). His unspeakable dreams shift from general apocalypse to tongue-biting scenes involving bombs and Miss Lora. Miss Lora’s own sleeping habits, covering her eyes with a mask and teeth with a mouth guard, speak to similar, unarticulated, nightmares. It is when the silence at home becomes too “terrible” that Yunior goes to Miss Lora’s house and fucks her. On the one night he tries to stay away from her, Yunior shows up at 3am and “she lets you bone her straight in the ass,” their relationship again emphasizing his differential sexual desires.

Though Yunior tries to mark his virginity loss as the beginning of a typical Dominican male “Ass Engine,” he is unable to have sex with any other women until he leaves for college. Conversely, aspects of his relationship with Miss Lora—her physicality, their anal sex, the way she encourages him to leave and attend college—parallel his relationship with Beto, again attending to the theme of latent queerness. While he’s with her, Yunior’s nightmares become worse, more damning and apocalyptic, indicative of the anxiety swelling within him. Yunior’s relationship with Miss Lora is marked not only by the pedophilic nature of their interactions but also by the way that she is repeatedly read as masculine by both Yunior and the rest of the neighborhood. Often mistaken for a bodybuilder, Miss Lora must explain that she was “born this way” when the neighborhood sees her in a bikini, “the top stretching over these corded pectorals and the bottom cupping a rippling fan of haunch muscles” (158). As with his own body, that of an actual weightlifter, Yunior explains he “must have had a mutant gene somewhere in the DNA” that controls his musculature (156). Yunior identifies not only with her

masculinity, but also with the way that their bodies and desires are read as freakish, and therefore fit together better than the rest.

Yunior claims that his inability to end things with Miss Lora is because he cannot find girls his own age, though his description of their final interactions echoes the emotional wreckage he feels when Beto leaves. Unable to deal with the unhinged state of his life after high school, Yunior goes to bars with his boys, drives around the neighborhood and gets “seriously faded” before eventually crawling back to her with his “dick in his hand” (172). As with Beto, Yunior feels that their intimacy is unacceptable by the standards of the society around them, ambivalent as he struggles to end things. Again, Yunior feels marked by the secret of their relationship: “It takes a long time to get over. To get used to life without a Secret. Even after it’s behind you and you’ve blocked her out completely, you’re still afraid you’ll slip back to it” (173). Yunior’s fear that he’ll ‘slip back to it’ parallels the anxiety he feels about desiring Beto, that outing his most intense romantic relationships could “evaporate” him, sending his life into the apocalyptic state of his dreams. Silence, he explains, is how one must handle such situations: “You certainly never talk about it” (173).

The silence that suffocates him both as Rafa is dying and after his death propels Yunior out of the house and into an intimate relationship with a muscular older woman who lets him fuck her like a man. As with his other queer intimacies, Yunior feels compelled to keep their relationship a secret. To hide his queerness under assumed identity as traditional Dominican male, Yunior must trick himself into believing that he is just like his father and brother, “sucios of the worst kind,” men who are always blatantly screwing multiple women without shame (165). When Yunior meets the “mujerón of your dreams...the one you finally trust. The one you finally tell” she announces his past relationship with Miss Lora to his mother, and both women denounce him as “just like his father and his brother” (174). After this confrontation, Yunior refuses to speak to her for several weeks, the silence spreading between them until he finds her at a concert and they reconnect. His new girlfriend claims that, by disrespecting his relationship with Miss Lora, she “just wanted to protect” Yunior – but it remains unclear from what she wished to protect him. Another force for patrolling his Dominicaness, sexuality, and masculinity, Yunior’s new girlfriend affirms the unacceptable nature of one of his most

formative intimacies. At the end of the story, Yuniór and “the *mujerón*” are over but it is Miss Lora who remains on his mind. Returning to the Dominican Republic – a space they share only in ethnicity, never in lived experience – Yuniór carries a photo bearing the image of the two of them, together. Flashing it as he goes through La Vega, Yuniór searches for Miss Lora, an outsider who made him feel less freakishly alone.

Conclusion

As Yuniór repeatedly revisits to stories about Dominican outcasts like Miss Lora, Beto, and Oscar, so, too, does he return to the Dominican Republic – physically, emotionally, and narratively – as a way to reconcile the past. Yuniór circles between the two countries, following the declaration that Beto makes as he leaves for college, that “you can’t be anywhere forever” (*Drown*, 107). Even if Yuniór makes his home in the United States, he will forever return to the Dominican Republic in order to locate the complete story of who and how he is. As with Ramón’s first life in the United States without his Dominican family, “a part of him [is] detained elsewhere,” unable to be articulated, made real again, without a homecoming (*Drown*, 192). To reconcile, he must return. At the end of his relationship in “A Cheater’s Guide to Love” Yuniór tries to salvage things by returning to the Dominican Republic with his fiancée, subsequently dates two Dominican women, and goes back to the Dominican Republic again with his best friend. Because, Yuniór explains, “what the hell else are you going to do?” except return home (206). In the final chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yuniór receives a dispatch from the Dominican Republic, a final package that Oscar has sent to Paterson, New Jersey that has gotten lost in transit for eight months (333). Though this package contains news of his lost virginity, the second package remains lost in the journey – or, more fittingly, lost in the Dominican Republic. As metaphor for the transmigrant experience, a part of the narrative remains inextricably embedded in the Dominican Republic, unable to be fully recounted in the United States.

Only in his dreams does Yuniór begin to disclose the deepest parts of himself, though those, too, have the possibility to fail. In his dreams he tries to tell Lola “the words that could have saved us” and the sounds come out as marked silences:

“ _____ ” (327). In all three of Díaz’s collections, silences remain a barrier to complete intimacy, alternately delineating and foreclosing the complexity that each character’s personal narrative holds. The *paginas en blanco* within these texts disclose as much as the written text itself – and also speak to what is inextricably lost between countries, languages, and rewritten political truths. This silence, too, contains the actuality of the transmigrant experience. Díaz’s epigraph in *Drown* by Gustavo Pérez Firmat states, “My subject:/how to explain to you that I/don’t belong to English/though I belong nowhere else.” In this statement we can trace an undercurrent that spans the entirety of these three texts, recognizing that the lost parts of the narrative are forever located in the expanse between the two countries, between the two languages – they belong in the nebulous space where Oscar’s second package remains, the in-between. In narrating his experience trying to traverse this space, Yunior must craft a path that has not yet been travelled; in repeatedly doing so, he begins to allow the silences to speak. As Anzaldúa explains,³² in this physical and metaphysical transmigration, “every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again alien in a new territory. And again, and again” (70). To reflexively enter into such a series of crossings means to enter into a process of continual becomings, to tread the painful terrain of “knowing,” to revisit the same scenes from different angles while trying to continue on into new territory. When Yunior begins to penetrate the uncharted region of a new, hybrid masculinity, he must carry the trappings of his past along as mementos.

In tracing Yunior’s character progression across Díaz’s texts, we gain a more complex sense of his hybrid identity, relationship to his own masculinity, and the trauma embedded within the experience of diaspora. In his narrative structure, we are able to locate the cyclical nature of his migration story and the ways that past and present traumas shape his navigation of the United States, Dominican Republic, and the transmigrant space of the inbetween, or, in Bhabha’s³³ terminology, Third Space.³⁴ Ultimately, it is this “inbetween space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (37, 38). In the inbetween we may locate the crux of Yunior’s identity.

³² *Borderlands/La Frontera*

³³ *The Location of Culture*

³⁴ This is a concept that is based upon the complexity of hybrid identity and challenges the assumption that culture is necessarily homogenizing or unifying.

The ambivalent relationship he maintains with the oppositional elements in his psyche and various cultural discourses surrounding him are formative, though not necessarily simple to navigate. Over the course of his adulthood, Yuniór must consciously choose which parts of himself to nurture and which to progressively reject. As we witness, the choice is not always his; there will always be moments in which others label him. While acknowledging the importance of the contradictions held within his body and mind, Yuniór must come to terms with his hybridity and accept it as positively formative. Yuniór's character progression may also be understood as a movement toward reconciliation and self-forgiveness. As Machado Sáez so articulately states, "Díaz's novel is a foundational fiction for the Dominican diaspora, an attempt to reconcile exile with belonging, diaspora with nation, marginal with mainstream" (544). This never-ending negotiation process forms the core of Yuniór's identity and provides insight into his compulsion to narrate the stories of characters, like himself, that are children of the diaspora.

By delving into the past, Yuniór, like Oscar and Lola, gains the power to more completely comprehend the present. As Lola clarifies, "if these years have taught me anything it is this: 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). Outlining their traumatic, migratory pasts, the characters in Díaz's novels must forever move into the vaults of history to locate otherwise unintelligible portions of the present. By alternately locating and filling the *paginas en blanco*, they gain a greater understanding of their individual lives while also allowing some sense of closure with the stories unearthed in the Dominican Republic. Even if the stories that have driven their families toward exile are traumatic, uncomfortable, and violent, the act of recounting provides a certain amount of insight into the difficulty of belonging, both within the United States and Dominican Republic. This approach touches upon the line of theory delineated by Ann Cvetkovitch,³⁵ who maintains that the domain of traumatic experience falls within the scope of the everyday. As Cvetkovitch asserts, "The nuances of everyday emotional life contain the residues that are left by traumatic histories, and they too belong in the archive of trauma" (280). I

³⁵ *An Archive of Feeling*.

contend that Díaz's texts hold as miniature examples of such 'archives,' demonstrating, as they do, the connection between historical experience, affect, identity and culture.³⁶

In the basement of his home, Yuniór archives Oscar's writings in four refrigerators, "the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything" (330). He has fabricated his own archive of feeling in the collected writings of a dead man, a man whose curse has compelled Yuniór to confront his own *fuku*. In these final passages, Yuniór fantasizes that Lola's daughter Isis will come to his home "looking for answers," that she will "take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (331). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this is Yuniór's hope, his dream – though he acknowledges his fear that, ultimately, nothing ever ends. A parallel message is inscribed in the closing paragraphs of *This is How We Lose Her*. Situated again at his writing desk, Yuniór has located a more promising philosophy about the future. In the midst of middle-age, he returns to another vault, the archive of his infidelities, as a means to forge ahead. As in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, love – painful, violent, formidable – remains the undiluted force that propels him forward. In the final pages of "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Yuniór scrawls out the first line of his new book: "*the half life of love is forever*" (217). In this one sentence, he is able to find the momentum to begin again. The power resides in his recognition that the pain, pleasure, and complexity of love will never degenerate into anything less volatile. Love, another form of knowledge, can suddenly be harnessed as a generative force. Though another beginning is not equivalent to a fresh start, it is something akin to hope, to grace, as "you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get" (217).

³⁶ Cvetkovitch continues, "trauma is a window onto the study of how historical experience is embedded in sensational experience and how affective experience can form the basis for culture" (285).

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