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THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES** JOURNAL

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CONTENTS

Editorial: All Me...All the Time 1
Bob Batchelor

ARTICLES

Relational Aggression on Film: An Intersectional Analysis of Mean Girls 5

Michaela D. E. Meyer, Linda M. Waldron, and Danielle M. Stern

No Face: Implied Author and Masculine Construct in the Fiction of Junot Díaz 35

Josef Benson

***Frankenstein* Performed: The Monster Who Will Not Die** 65

Jeanne Tiehen

Discipline and Policing: HBO's *The Wire* as a Critique of Modern American Culture 87

Morgan Shipley and Jack Taylor

Performing Ordinary: Politicians, Celebrity, & the Politics of Representation on Entertainment Talk 109

Sue Collins

Communication Deficiencies Provide Incongruities for Humor: The Asperger's-like Case of *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper 140

Karen McGrath

Influence of Popular Television Programming on Students' Perception about Course Selection, Major, and Career 172

Kristy Tucciarone

Partisan Pop Cultural Awareness: Disclosing the Metaphoric Rhetoric of the “Culture Wars” 193
Jeremy V. Adolphson

‘Social’ TV: *Pretty Little Liars*, Casual Fandom, Celebrity Instagramming, and Media Life 215
Cory Barker

INTERVIEW

***The Popular Culture Studies Journal* Interview with GEORGE EDWARD CHENEY** 243

BOOK REVIEWS

THE STUART HALL FORUM 256
Stuart Hall: Relevance and Remembrance
Jennifer C. Dunn

Considering Hall and Reconsidering Foundations of the Popular
“Notes On Deconstructing ‘The Popular’”
Jules Wight

Still Getting Us a Little Further Down the Road
“The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview with Stuart Hall”
Linda Baughman

Reviewing and Reflecting: *Representations*
Adam W. Tyma

***THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL* BOOK REVIEWS** 274
Introductions
Jennifer C. Dunn

Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism & Kinship in Popular Culture
Rachel E. Silverman

Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production
Vanessa Campagna

Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World
Aaron Barlow

*Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue: The Secret Traditionalism of
Television Bad Boys*
Bob Batchelor

Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century
CarrieLynn D. Reinhard

*Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to
NASCAR*
Norma Jones

Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot
Adam Perry

*Feeling Mediated: A History of Media Technology and Emotion in
America*
William Kist

Screening the Undead: Vampires and Zombies in Film and Television
Jesse Kavadlo

*My Lunches with Orson: Conversations between Henry Jaglom and
Orson
Welles*
L. Lelaine Bonine

*Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age. Digital Media and
Society Series*
La Royce Batchelor

The United States of Paranoia
Ted Remington

*The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your
Identity and Your Worth*
Janelle Applequist

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Chrys Egan and John Egan

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

323

No Face: Implied Author and Masculine Construct in the Fiction of Junot Díaz

JOSEF BENSON

In the lead story of his first book, Junot Díaz presents the masked man as a construction of masculinity that pervades all three of his books, especially the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The concomitant fear of unmasking or emasculation results in a hypermasculine¹ repudiation of queerness² that drives Yunior, the narrator of the Díaz universe. By imputing his fictional universe to his narrator Yunior, the implied author³ of these texts also wears a mask. Yunior's mask-trope is most salient in his treatment of the character Oscar in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Oscar is coaxed into wearing the mask of anti-queer masculinity and then killed off. If one accepts Yunior's unreliability, that he does not represent the implied author's worldview, then the appropriate way to read the actual author Díaz's fiction is as highly engineered hipster sexism,⁴ utterly ironic in its depiction of Yunior's point of view, reflecting an implied authorial mask that ensures ironic distance and aligns with those writers whom David Foster Wallace describes as "entertaining and effective, and...at the same time... agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (49).

The Masked Man

The juxtaposition of Yunior's sexual molestation by a man on a bus and the unmasking of Ysrael in the short story "Ysrael" suggests a symbolic

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relationship between these two events, centering on Ysrael's mask and Yunior's decision to keep the molestation to himself rather than risk his own unmasking. This story begins the narrative journey of Yunior, the narrator for all three of Díaz's books, including the very first story, "Ysrael." While on a bus with his older brother Rafa, Yunior is molested by a man who acts as though he is trying to help Yunior get a stain off of his pants:

You have to watch out for stains like that, the man next to me said. He had big teeth and wore a clean fedora. His arms were ropy with muscles. These things are too greasy, I said. Let me help. He spit in his fingers and started to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of my *pinga* through the fabric of my shorts. He was smiling. I shoved him against the seat. He looked to see if anybody had noticed. You *pato*, I said ... You low-down *pinga*-sucking *pato*, I said. The man squeezed my bicep, quietly, hard, the way my friends would sneak me in church. I whimpered. (*Drown* 12)

Yunior does not tell his brother about the molestation. Instead, he hides it and dons his mask of anti-queer hypermasculinity. When Rafa sees Yunior crying about what had happened he accuses him of being weak: "Rafa took off his shirt and fanned himself and that's when I started to cry. He watched for a moment. You, he said, are a pussy. I'm sorry. What the hell's the matter with you? We didn't do anything wrong. I'll be OK in a second" (13). Rafa has no idea what has happened and mistakes Yunior's crying for his fear of getting caught for not paying the bus fare.

Rafa literally unmasks Ysrael, who "when he was a baby a pig had eaten his face off, skinned it like an orange" (7), not long after the event on the bus, signaling the symbolic connection.⁵ The implication is that Yunior is afraid that like Ysrael he may also be unmasked, mistakenly thinking that he has been tainted by the man on the bus. Diaz writes,

my brother brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head. It exploded, the thick bottom spinning away like a crazed eyeglass and I said, Holy f*cking sh*t. Ysrael stumbled once and slammed into a fence post that had been sunk into the side of the road ... Rafa kicked him in the side ... Rafa took off his mask and threw it spinning into the grass. (18)

The molestation and subsequent unmasking exists as perhaps the seminal occurrence in the Díaz universe, influencing Yuniór's worldview and defining the masculinity that informs much of the work. Just before Ysrael is unmasked, Yuniór identifies with him: "Ysrael had his kite in hand ... Where did you get that? I asked. Nueva York, he said. From my father. No sh*t! Our father's there too! I shouted. I looked at Rafa, who, for an instant, frowned" (16). Rafa, planning to unmask Ysrael, recognizes Yuniór's identification with Ysrael and does not approve. John Riofrio notes, "'Ysrael,' the first story of Díaz's collection, sets the stage for the picture of masculinity which will reveal itself throughout all ten of the stories" (26). This definition of masculinity informs all three of Díaz's texts. Riofrio continues, "Ysrael's disfigurement places him in the same category as the feminine ... That the neighborhood boys' goal in chasing Ysrael is to feminize him is a concrete manifestation of what they already know: in their world weakness, disfigurement, and non-conformity are all vulnerabilities which are to be exploited and castigated" (31). The boys respond violently to Ysrael's queerness and vulnerability in order to prove that they are not like him.

In the penultimate story Ysrael has transformed into a sort of superhero named No Face, a masked man with special powers who continually runs from the threat of unmasking: "We're going to make you a girl, the fat one says and he can hear the words echoing through the meat of the fat boy's body ... You ever been a girl before? I betcha he hasn't. It ain't a lot of fun" (Drown 156). Yuniór has transformed Ysrael into No Face as a projection of his own mask and sense of power to defend himself

from emasculation: “He runs past the water hose and the pasture, and then he says FLIGHT and jumps up and his shadow knives over the tops of the trees” (153); “No Face! a few yell out but he has no time for them” (154); “He has his power of INVISIBILITY” (155); “He says STRENGTH and the fat boy flies off him” (156). Instead of Ysrael taking off his mask and facing his pursuers, he has transformed from his disfigured and feminized former self into No Face, a masked man who has capitalized on his hidden identity.

The superhero No Face evolves in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* into a signifier of the hypermasculine dictatorial violence that befalls the Cabral family, ultimately signifying *fukú* itself, a force of hypermasculine evil. Before particular members of the Cabral family, Beli, Socorro, and Oscar, experience terrible state-sanctioned violence, they are paid a visit from No Face, who instead of wearing a mask, has no face at all: “our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed” (135); “the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (237); “Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face” (298). At other times facelessness represents sheer patriarchal hypermasculine violence: “her ‘father’s’ face had turned blank at the moment he picked up the skillet” (261). Finally, the image of the superhero itself represents hypermasculine violence: “One heavysset *cibaeño* even demanded his underwear, and when Abelard coughed them up the man pulled them on over his pants” (239). The latter image evokes superheroes who wear some kind of different color underwear over their bodysuit.

Queerness

The prominent male gaze through which Díaz's world is filtered reflects hypermasculine homosexuality and anti-queerness. Queerness in this sense represents any sort of anti- or non-patriarchal behavior. *Elena Machado Sáez* writes, "I find Juana María Rodríguez's definition of queerness useful for fleshing out its function in Díaz's novel: 'it is a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity' and 'creates an opportunity to call into question the systems of categorization that have served to define sexuality'" (524). Queerness also represents behavior that threatens hegemonic masculinity, including traditional femininity. Riofrio notes that for much of Latin American "crafting a masculine identity is profoundly connected to the daily struggle to keep the feminine at arms length thus enabling ... boys to rightfully claim their masculinity" (29). This Latin conception of masculine identity is, in part, based on Octavio Paz's idea that "the ideal of manliness is never to 'crack,' never to back down. Those who 'open themselves up' are cowards. Unlike other people, we believe that opening oneself up is a weakness or a betrayal" (30). Consequently, the feminine is the vulnerable, the open, the submissive, *the queer*, opposed to the closed and aggressive masculine.

The macho or machismo while being anti-queer and anti-feminine is not necessarily heterosexual. Luis Alberto Urrea notes, "I also learned an unspoken lesson about machismo. All the toughest males, every *muy macho chignón* from deep Mexico who entered my house, was obsessed with forcing the younger children to suck his d*ck. Each one wanted to push his hard-on up the asses of the boys and girls of our family" (105). Homosexual acts among machos are unexpected considering as Ilán Stavans notes, "Among Hispanics, homosexuals are the target of high-well insurmountable animosity" (154). One in this sense is only homosexual if one is the submissive bottom, if one takes another man's penis anally or orally, or assumes the submissive role to another's aggressive. Stavans

goes on to write, “Despite the stigma, homosexuals have been a ubiquitous presence in the Hispanic world ... They are the other side of Hispanic sexuality, a shadow one refuses to acknowledge” (155).

Perhaps this paradox in part explains why machos are so violently concerned with maintaining their exulted masculinity. Machismo seems to be at once queer *and* anti-queer, the queer masked and hidden. Stavans further asserts, “The Hispanic macho goes out of his way to keep up appearances, to exalt his virility, but he often fails. Sooner or later, his glorious masculinity will be shared in bed with another man. Who is gay among us? It’s a secret. We simply don’t want to talk about it” (156). By linking macho homosexual masculinity with the repudiation of queerness one enters into a dangerous queer space that is both violent and homoerotic. Sáez points out, “Robin Wood summarizes one of Sigmund Freud’s stages of paranoia as ‘the Don Juan syndrome where homosexuality is denied by means of obsessive pursuit of women’” (546). Perhaps Yuniór, a hypermasculine, bisexual, and anti-queer character can be diagnosed as having the Don Juan syndrome, overcompensating for his ambiguous border masculinity in a country, the U.S., where even a top is considered queer.

In two of Díaz’s short stories, “Drown” and “Miss Lora” the tension between homosexuality and anti-queerness bears down on Yuniór. In “Drown” Yuniór engages in a homosexual relationship with the very macho character Beto. Raphael Dalleo contends, “Beto emerges as a model of masculine behavior, a courageous and unemotional trickster. His name serves to emphasize the ‘beast’ of hypermasculinity that Beto enacts” (80). While Beto exemplifies the macho ideal, Yuniór offers, “He’s a *pato* now but two years ago we were friends and he would walk into the apartment without knocking ... We were raging then, crazy the way we stole, broke windows, the way we pissed on people’s steps and then challenged them to come out and stop us” (*Drown* 91).

Yunior assures the reader that he and Beto only fooled around “Twice. That’s it” (103). On both occasions Beto appears to assume the submissive role. Díaz writes, “What the f*ck are you doing? I asked, but he didn’t stop ... I kept my eyes on the television, too scared to watch. I came right away” (104). And later: “We sat in front of his television, in our towels, his hands bracing against my abdomen and thighs. I’ll stop if you want, he said and I didn’t respond. After I was done, he laid his head in my lap” (105). While Yunior accepting a hand-job and oral sex does not render him a homosexual based on the Latin idea of masculinity as merely a closed system, the two experiences clearly concern Yunior, maybe because he is an immigrant in a country that does not share his definition of hegemonic masculinity or heterosexuality: “Mostly I stayed in the basement, terrified that I would end up abnormal, a f*cking *pato*, but he was my best friend and back then that mattered to me more than anything” (104).

Another gendered conflict for Yunior centers on reconciling his relationship with Beto *and* taking the place of his father as breadwinner. His relationship with his mother mirrors that of a husband and wife within a classical patriarchal system: “We arrive at the mall and I give her fifty dollars. Buy something, I say, hating the image I have of her, picking through the sale bins, wrinkling everything. Back in the day, my father would give her a hundred dollars at the end of each summer for my new clothes and she would take nearly a week to spend it” (97). Yunior feels inferior to his father who gave his mother one hundred dollars where he can only give her fifty. His masculine insecurity then is agitated further by his relationship with Beto, who in a way functions as “the other woman,” the mistress to his wifely mother.

This would not matter if Beto were female largely because many of the men in these stories cheat on their wives. The problem of course is that Beto is a man. The story ends with another image of Yunior assuming the role of husband to his mother: “I let her sleep until the end of the movie

and when I wake her she shakes her head, grimacing. You better check those windows, she says. I promise her I will” (107). Yuniór not only rejects Beto in order to better provide for his mother and take his father’s place, but he also lashes out at other homosexuals in his community. Dalleo points out, “the desperation of the men’s attempt to connect with these women is further accentuated by their performance of violence against homosexual men. The men go on ritual excursions to harass the men at gay bars” (81). Yuniór, in this story, constructs a sort of masked hypermasculine incestuous homosexual persona that is at the same time violently anti-queer.

In “Miss Lora,” Yuniór engages in a queer relationship with an androgynous woman and struggles to convince himself that he is just like his brother and father. The story is full of homosexual references and Yuniór feels insecure about Miss Lora’s gender ambiguity. He initially needs to assure himself that his brother Rafa would approve since he is the first man Yuniór feared might unmask him: “Years later you would wonder if it hadn’t been for your brother would you have done it ... how skinny she was, no *culo*, no titties ... but your brother didn’t care. I’d f*ck her. You’d f*ck anything, someone jeered” (*This Is How* 149). Yuniór finds comfort in being a player like his father and brother: “Both your father and your brother were *sucios*...*Sucios* of the worst kind and now it’s official: you are one, too. You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were kidding yourself” (161). Rather than Yuniór really hoping the gene missed him, he is glad and even heartened that he is like his other male family members. He seems to be making an argument, trying to convince himself, hiding the mask that can be taken away, for Miss Lora is not like the girls and women his brother and father chased:

Miss Lora was too skinny. Had no hips whatsoever. No breasts, either, no ass, even her hair failed to make the grade ... what she was most famous for in the neighborhood were her muscles. Not

that she had huge ones like you—chick was just wiry like a motherf*cker, every single fiber standing out in outlandish definition ... Always a bikini despite her curvelessness, the top stretching over these corded pectorals and the bottom cupping a rippling fan of haunch muscles. (154)

Miss Lora's childlessness further marks her as a queer character:

"Something must have happened, your mother speculated. In her mind a woman with no child could only be explained by vast untrammelled calamity" (153). She allows Yunior to orgasm inside her, suggesting that there is no possibility that she will get pregnant: "This time you don't even ask about the condom. You just come inside her" (162). She also enjoys anal sex: "even though she is falling asleep she lets you bone her straight in the ass. F*cking amazing, you keep saying for all four seconds it takes you to come. You have to pull my hair while you do it, she confides. That makes me shoot like a rocket" (163). These sexual preferences threaten patriarchal heteronormativity by empowering a woman to enjoy sex without the threat of pregnancy.

The story hints that Miss Lora's masculine body has a history of attracting gay men. She says of a former boyfriend, "To this day I think he was gay" (164). The kids at the school in which she teaches tease another teacher also seeing Miss Lora: "They say Mr. Everson likes to put on dresses. You think she straps it on for him? ... She probably does strap it on" (167). Miss Lora's androgyny concerns Yunior, further evincing the masculine insecurity that fuels his anti-queerness and firmly preserves his hypermasculine homosexual mask.

Latin Masculinities

One pervasive symbol of Latin masculinities seems to be a mask, a mask to close off and ensure one's masculinity, a mask to guard against homosexual exposure, and a mask behind which to simply hide. Paz notes, "The Mexican, whether young or old, *criollo* or *mestizo*, general or laborer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile. In his harsh solitude, which is both barbed and courteous, everything serves him as a defense: silence and words, politeness and disdain, irony and resignation" (29). As a result, according to Paz, "He is condemned to play his role throughout life, since the pact between himself and his impersonation cannot be broken except by death or sacrifice. The lie takes command of him and becomes the very foundation of his personality" (42).

While the mask of Latin masculinity ensures the perpetuation of the macho, and guards against queer exposure, some Latin male thinkers suggest that the macho functions as a means to fight oppression and to be heard. Martín Espada argues, "'Macho,' as employed by Anglos, is a Spanish word that particularly seems to identify Latino male behavior as the very standard of sexism and violence ... In nearby Holyoke, police officers routinely round up Puerto Rican men drinking beer on the stoop ... as a means of controlling the perceived threat of macho volatility on the street" (87). Espada further contends:

While Latino male behavior is, indeed, all too often sexist and violent, Latino males in this country are in fact no worse in that regard than their Anglo counterparts ... Yet, any assertiveness on the part of Latino males, especially any form of resistance to Anglo authority, is labeled macho and instantly discredited. (88)

The idea that the macho signifies not sexism and male aggression, but rather the empowered voice of the oppressed is shared by Omar S. Castañeda:

Everyone is equal in macho oratory and has an equal right to make assertions, ask questions, doubt, challenge authority, and, most important, to be wrong. Entering the word is vigorous and invigorating, and is a communal appeal to higher aspirations. It invites participation, passes judgment only on those who pass it first or wield it unfairly, and asks for reciprocated dignity. That's something to praise (49).

In this sense the macho equates agency through language.

In Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the notion of the macho as literary agency is undermined by definitions of macho as mere masculine aggression and violence. On two occasions Díaz notes writers who attempted to expose the violent and oppressive Trujillo regime through language, Latin men who entered the word, and were put to death:

Much in the news in those days, Jesús de Galíndez was a Basque supernerd and a Columbia University grad student who had written a rather unsettling doctoral dissertation ... [about] the era of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina ... Galíndez got gagged, bagged, and dragged to La Capital, and legend has it when he came out of his chloroform nap he found himself naked, dangling from his feet over a cauldron of *boiling oil*. (96-97)

On another occasion Díaz mentions a grade-school boy who wrote a paper stating, "I'd like to see our country be a *democracia* like the United States. I wish we would stop having dictators. Also I believe that it was Trujillo who killed Galíndez. That's all it took. The next day both he and the

teacher were gone. No one saying nothing” (96). Alternatively, the novel seems to glorify the macho as misogynistic, violent, sexist, racist, and homophobic.

The glorification of the macho in the novel starts with Trujillo, of whom Díaz says, “If you think the average Dominican guy’s bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse ... the regime would have been the world’s first culocracy” (*The Brief Wondrous* 217). While on one level Trujillo is presented as evil incarnate, on another level he is romanticized: “if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near *El Jefe*, within the week she’d be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it*” (217); “Trujillo is not a man. He is ... a cosmic force ... He belongs to ... the category of those born to a special destiny”;⁶ “Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated” (80).

Even his death is equated with an archetype for romanticized gangster hypermasculinity, Tony Montana from the 1983 film *Scarface*: “He could have ordered Zacarías to turn the car back to the safety of his capital, but instead he goes out like Tony Montana” (155). And yet Tony Montana with a twist: “For a while, I hear, that stretch was the haunt of what *El Jefe* worried about the most: los maricones” (155). Trujillo, the quintessential hypermasculine, violent, anti-queer force in the novel, also shares in Latin homoerotic masculinity: “if you think the Trujillato was not homoerotic, then, to quote the Priest, *you got another thing coming*” (215).

Perhaps the most egregious example in the novel of Yunió glorifying a bad man is The Gangster, a man who nearly kills Oscar’s grandmother: “By the time he was twenty-two he was operating his own string of brothels in and around the capital, owned houses and cars in three countries” (121); “In the forties the Gangster was in his prime; he traveled the entire length of the Americas, from Rosario to Nueva York, in pimpdaddy style, staying at the best hotels, banging the hottest broads ... dining in four-star restaurants, confabbing with arch-criminals the world

over” (121); “He was a true gangster, gully to the bone, lived the life all those phony rap acts can only rhyme about” (122). The Gangster displays an absolute disregard for Beli’s humanity, and yet Yunion says, “it was he who taught her all about her body, her orgasms, her rhythms, who said, You have to be bold, and for that he must be honored, no matter what happened in the end” (127). One could argue that the book itself is an example of the macho entering the word, yet in Diaz’s novel he makes it clear that “The reign of Trujillo was not the best time to be a lover of Ideas” (214). The definition of the macho that is celebrated in the novel is clearly the same one used to oppress Latin men. And it is also the same definition that compels one to wear the mask.

Narrative Control

By examining the narrative power structure in Díaz’s fiction, one can establish that the controller of the Díaz universe is a masked man. In Díaz’s fictive universe, Yunion is a *self-conscious narrator* aware of his control of the text according to Wayne Booth’s definition:

Cutting across the distinction between observers and narrator-agents of all these kinds is the distinction between *self-conscious* narrators ... aware of themselves as writers ... and narrators or observers who rarely if ever discuss their writing chores ... or who seem unaware that they are writing, thinking, speaking, or ‘reflecting’ a literary work. (155)

At times Yunior hubristically asserts himself and comments on the text:

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the *perrito* (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me. (*The Brief Wondrous* 132)

While Yunior appears to control the text as the narrator, one must be aware of the implied author: “The *implied* author (the author’s ‘second self’) ... creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God silently paring his fingernails” (151). The implied author is Díaz, but one must realize that Díaz, the implied author, is different from Díaz, the actual author: “This implied author is always distinct from the ‘real man’—whatever we take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a ‘second self,’ as he creates his work” (Booth 151).

Because there appears to be consistency in the hypermasculine homosexual anti-queer masculinity espoused in *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *This Is How You Lose Her* and embodied in the narrator Yunior, I have chosen to conflate the three implied authors of the three books into one implied author, Díaz. Booth contends, “The *narrator* may be more or less distant from the *implied author*. The distance may be moral” (156). In terms of who is responsible for the worldview in the text, one must determine what *kind* of narrator Yunior is. Booth asserts, “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158-59). At no

point in the works does Yuniór claim to “have qualities which the author denies him” (159).

Yuniór delivers: he is apparently a very good writer and a consummate ladies’ man. These seem to be the two qualities that he boasts about most, or of which he is desirous. That he is at times deceptive is not enough to call him unreliable. As Booth claims, “It is true that most of the great narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus ‘unreliable’ in the sense of being potentially deceptive. But difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability normally a matter of lying” (159). Yuniór is reliable in that he seems to embody the spirit of all three works. He is a catalyst, a Watcher, even perhaps the hero of all three works. Notably, of all the characters in the Díaz world, Yuniór seems to fare the best, his only real conflict being his confessed and self-inflicted heartbreak. Richard Patteson believes, “Lola, who narrates two sections of *Oscar Wao* in the first person ... slightly [reduces] the totality of Yuniór’s control over the text” (12). Yet as Gerard Genette notes,

the narrator of the second narrative is already a character in the first one, and ... the act of narrating which produces the second narrative is an event recounted in the first one. We will define this difference in level by saying that *any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed* ... writing ... is a (literary) act carried out at the first level, which we will call *extradiegetic*; the events told ... are inside this first narrative, so we will describe them as *diegetic*, or *intradiegetic* ... the events told in ... a narrative in the second degree, we will call *metadiegetic*. (228)

The narrative situation of the Lola chapters are metadiegetic and recounted under the controlling aegis of Yuniór’s second level intradiegetic narrative. Thusly, Yuniór, as a reliable and parallel extension of the

implied author Díaz, controls all three texts and all the characters in those texts.

Díaz, the actual author, notes about his third book, *This Is How You Lose Her*: “the book we are reading is not directly from me. It’s Yuniór De La Casa’s book. He, at the end of the book, is seen writing the book that now we realize that we have been reading” (Wolinsky). In this interview Díaz appears to shirk the responsibility for the text, placing it instead on a fictional character who obviously cannot explain himself. Díaz goes on to say in another interview, “The book is a highly wrought object. It’s engineered. It may seem casual. It may seem conversational or vernacular, it may lead people to believe that this is my voice but if I read a page, you would begin to realize how artificial the experience is” (Rodríguez). If the book does not reflect Díaz’s *voice*, whose voice does it reflect? Díaz goes on to say, “Fiction is an artisan that convinces its reader that it’s real. The voice is the book, while it may have tone and highlights directly from me, this voice is highly artificial. It doesn’t really represent the way I speak.” Again, Díaz evades ownership of his work leaving readers to wonder how a writer, who can create an object that through his own admission, has virtually nothing to do with the creator.

Sáez suggests, “If readers accept Yuniór’s narrative without question, without interrogating Yuniór’s narrative authority, without asking how Yuniór’s desires and values shape the moral lessons implied by the ending, then we are left with a curse of our own—the curse of ignorance concerning how our own desires leave us vulnerable to the dictations of others” (551). Indeed, perhaps not only must we interrogate Yuniór’s narrative authority, but maybe we ought to interrogate the implied author’s authority. Or even the actual author’s authority. I certainly would not break the cardinal rule of literary criticism and implicate the actual masked man.⁷

Oscar as Yuniór's Narrative Project

If one were to think of all three of Díaz's books as one long narrative of Yuniór's life, then one might see that by *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yuniór is at the height of his hubristic powers as a writer and as a character. Patteson finds, "The few details that Yuniór reveals about his family and his past life confirm that he is the same Yuniór who appears in Díaz's memorable first book, the short story collection *Drown*. In the novel, Yuniór presents himself as almost the opposite of his awkward friend Oscar: fit, muscular, in every way the 'typical' Dominican male" (8). What we find out in *Drown* is that Yuniór is motivated by his brother Rafa. In *Drown* he describes Rafa as an unparalleled lothario: "He'd take the campo girls down to the dams to swim and if he was lucky they let him put it in their mouths or in their asses" (5); "Later, while we were in bed listening to the rats on the zinc roof he might tell me what he'd done. I'd hear about *tetas* and *chochas* and *leche* and he'd talk without looking over 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).

In *This Is How You Lose Her* Rafa is depicted as having the same influence as in *Drown*: "Before we even swung onto 516 Nilda was in my brother's lap and he had his hand so far up her skirt it looked like he was performing a surgical procedure. When we were getting off the bus Rafa pulled me aside and held his hand in front of my nose. Smell this, he said. This is what's wrong with women" (34). Rafa, who Yuniór once feared might unmask him like he did Ysrael, functions as Yuniór's role model in all three books: "I always followed Rafa, trying to convince him to let me tag along" (*Drown* 6). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yuniór appears to have followed his brother's lead: "Me, who was f*cking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches *at the same time* and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs; me, who had p*ssy coming out my ears" (185).

While Yunior's moniker as The Watcher is accurate in that the novel is filtered through his hypermasculine homosexual anti-queer gaze, it is not accurate in terms of Yunior simply reporting events from the sidelines. Anne Garland Mahlter suggests, "Yunior, the narrator of *Oscar Wao*, refers to himself numerous times throughout the novel as 'The Watcher,' which Díaz expressly states is based on the character of Uatu the Watcher from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comic series *Fantastic Four* ... In *Fantastic Four*, Uatu the Watcher lives on the moon where he monitors the activity of humans on the Earth and is under a sworn oath to never interfere" (123). Yunior not only directly interferes with the characters in the text, but he actually silences the other characters, especially Oscar, in an attempt to save him from his own queerness, inadvertently creating another No Face.

Yunior introduces the character Oscar de Leon as a deeply flawed queer character in need of fixing, whose problems mostly stem from his unfortunate weight: "He was a stout kid, heading straight to fat, but his mother kept him nice in haircuts and clothes, and before the proportions of his head changed he'd had these lovely flashing eyes and these cute-ass cheeks, visible in all the pictures" (12). Oscar's queerness, Yunior points out, is all the more troubling since Oscar is Dominican: "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" (24). Yunior likens Oscar to an X-Man, a mutant: "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" (22). Yunior seems to suggest that Oscar's bookishness is a result of his queerness rather than a quality worth cultivating. Sáez holds, "While Oscar is endearingly inauthentic, Yunior's mission to identify him as a representative subject who can embody the Dominican diaspora leads him ultimately to silence Oscar's points of queer Otherness—his virginity and

sentimentality” (524). Echoing these sentiments in the text, Yuniór announces, “I decided that I was going to fix Oscar’s life” (175).

Before Yuniór attempts to fix Oscar’s life, he removes the threat of Oscar entering the word and vying for narratological supremacy: “when I got up he’d already be at his computer ... [claiming] he was in the middle of this amazingly important chapter. Write it later, bitch” (177). Yuniór, a writer himself, queers Oscar’s literary aspirations in order to thwart them: “I couldn’t believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so” (180). Yuniór seizes and appropriates Oscar’s writing, altering it to his own advantage: “Was I really reading my roommate’s journal behind his back? Of course I was” (185). Yuniór at times even points out where Oscar’s written version of the events that Yuniór is narrating differs from his official published version: “In Oscar’s version, I raised my hand and said, *Mellon*. Took him a second to recognize the word” (200). Finally, Yuniór ensures that only his version survives by destroying Oscar’s version and then pretending he never received it. Yuniór reports that Oscar has written a book that has been lost:

Told her to watch out for the second package. This contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA). Only problem was, the f*cking thing never arrived! Either got lost in the mail or he was slain before he put it in the mail, or whoever he trusted to deliver it forgot. (333-34)

If Oscar indeed located the cure to what ails him and his family, then perhaps he traced the curse of *fukú* to the Latin mask of hypermasculine homosexual anti-queerness, something that Yuniór cannot allow. Instead, Yuniór destroys Oscar’s version and creates his own in which Oscar dons the mask and then is martyred for a cause inconsistent with his character.

Late in the novel while Oscar is attempting to learn how to create a meaningful life outside of traditional definitions of Dominican masculinity: “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 feminine, the gay ... in every one of these ... he saw himself” (264), in an instance of *deus ex machina* he falls “in love with a semiretired *puta*. Her name was Ybón Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his *real* life” (279). Yunior relates that Oscar told him that “Ybón actually *f*cked* him. Praise be to Jesus!” (334). For this brief foray into normativity, Oscar is first beaten within an inch of his life, then mercilessly killed. Yunior views this as a resounding success story: “You should have seen him. He was so thin, had lost all the weight” (312); “He had gotten some power of his own” (319); “they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn’t be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he’d be a hero, an avenger” (321-22). Once again Yunior has transformed a queer character into a masked superhero symbolizing a specific and mythic construction of masculinity that is dangerously hypermasculine, homosexual, and anti-queer. Mahler notes,

While recovering from the beating he received from the *capitán’s* guards, Oscar undergoes a transformation. The superheroic nature of this change is anticipated by the fact that the guards, Gorilla Grodd and Solomon Grundy, are named after DC comic villains ... From this point forward, in which Oscar curses the curse that has haunted him, Oscar begins to transform ... into someone more courageous, powerful, and even more slender—someone more like a superhero. (128)

Oscar’s death completes his transformation from queer other to No Face, evidenced in Yunior’s dream after Oscar’s death: “Sometimes I look up at him [Oscar] and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (325).

According to Yuniór, Oscar accepts the violence he endures in exchange for sex with a retired prostitute and subsequently kisses and tells Yuniór all about it: “He reported that he’d liked it, and that Ybón’s you-know-what hadn’t tasted the way he had expected. She tastes like Heineken, he observed” (334). Yuniór’s version of these events is difficult to accept given that on a couple of occasions Oscar’s defiance of Yuniór slips through the cracks of Yuniór’s narrative. On one occasion Oscar confronts Yuniór for cheating on Lola: “Why do you cheat on her then? ... Maybe you should try to find out” (313). On another occasion Oscar chastises Yuniór and his friends for calling one of Oscar’s love interests a bitch: “Don’t call her a bitch, he said darkly. Yeah, Melvin imitated, don’t call her a bitch” (183). It simply does not square that at the end of the novel Oscar would essentially become another Yuniór, another hypermasculine Dominican anti-queer macho, insulting what he now views as the savior of his life by telling Yuniór in the most “dude(ish)” way that his girl’s vagina smells like a high-end import.

Simply put, the kind of yarn Yuniór wishes to tell is not that of a triumph for queerness less this triumph inadvertently unmasks him. Sáez contends, “The novel’s conclusion supposedly resolves the ambiguity of Oscar’s sexual identity as a virgin since he engages in a heterosexual act, having sex with Ybón. But in light of the fact that his act (like the novel as a whole) is a fiction constructed by Yuniór as narrator, the motivation for ‘resolving’ Oscar’s queerness is tied to the threat which that identity represents to Yuniór’s own sexuality” (548). In effect, Oscar’s queerness becomes more than anything the ultimate threat in the novel: “By isolating sexuality as the site by which to recuperate Oscar, Yuniór also identifies queerness as the most threatening point of difference embodied by Oscar” (549). The best way to thwart that threat is to silence Oscar and then fit him with a mask of his own.

Hipster Sexism and Irony

Paz notes that concomitant with the mask of Latin masculinity is acute sexist thinking: “Women are inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals” (30). True to Paz’s description, “Yunior’s language often reduces women to disposable objects of desire. Demeaning terms—‘p*ssy,’ ‘bitches,’ ‘sluts,’—infest the habitual patterns of his speech. Yunior inherits his hateful view of women from his father, brother and the world of men they inhabit” (Alford). Even Lola, whom Yunior claims to respect and care for, he objectifies: “She was a girl it was easy to care about ... bitch was almost six feet tall and no *tetas* at all and darker than your darkest grandma. Like two girls in one: the skinniest upperbody married to a pair of Cadillac hips and an ill donkey” (*The Brief Wondrous Life* 168). That Díaz’s work is replete with misogyny and sexism is perhaps obvious. What is not obvious and in fact quite baffling is that critics and even Díaz himself insist that his work aligns *with* the feminist struggle. Díaz claims in an interview, “The question was always, for someone like me: What is the role of the male artist in the feminist struggle? We can’t be feminists, I think. Our privilege prevents us. We can be feminist-aligned in some way. And so the women kept saying to us dudes, the best thing you can do is draw maps of masculine privilege. You can go places we can’t. Draw maps so when we drop the bombs, they land accurate” (Alford). Maybe even more flabbergasting is that some critics seem to agree:

My own reading of *This Is How You Lose Her* was unimpeded by my feminism because none of the women were held out as examples of success: these characters were actors in their own tragedies. Also, this is the baldly juvenile, wannabe macho Yunior’s story to tell, and the inner lives of these women are not depicted, with the exception of the narrator of ‘Otravida Otravez,’

who is certainly more than a *culo*-and-titties construct. In addition, the women depicted are complicated and involved in power struggles of their own. (Murray)

So, let me get this straight: Díaz's work is not sexist because A: the women are not romanticized for the oppression they endure, and B: because this is Yuniór's story and somehow a story told by a sexist character cannot be sexist? And C: the women are "complicated and involved in power struggles of their own." Are not these power struggles with the very men who oppress them? Nevertheless, for these reasons Sabina Murray thinks Díaz's work "does have a feminist ring to it, because the sense of the piece is that there is something unjust about the inequity." It seems to me that nowadays membership requirements for the feminist movement have grown lax indeed.

Díaz himself has suggested in interviews that "I had an idea for Yuniór at the beginning ... I wanted to talk about gender. I wanted to talk about masculinity" (Wolinsky); "There's not a lesson that I'm sort of asking my readers to walk away from but more of an encounter and a conversation that I'm trying to encourage" (Rodríguez); "What I was most committed to was using this male Dominican experience to wrestle with, to encourage my readers to wrestle with, larger questions about masculinity" (Rodríguez).

If we are to believe that Díaz presents Yuniór as a straw-man illustration of an issue that needs to be addressed, then there is no real difference in Díaz's work and the notion of hipster sexism. Allisa Quart reports, "Today, there's a raft of ads, photographs, television shows, films, and T-shirts, which represent young women being defined, but always ironically—and with a wink and a nod—by their sexuality and/or bodies. I think we should call this new strand of culture Hipster Sexism." In other words, hipster sexism, often exemplified in internet memes that are so egregiously sexist that one cannot help but realize that the producer is aware of their sexist nature, is supposed to demonstrate a sophisticated

form of satire that indicts sexism even as it ostensibly perpetuates it. One could also describe hipster sexism as just plain old sexist humor, which Julie A. Woodzicka notes “functions as a ‘releaser’ of prejudice” (182) safeguarded within the hip context of sophisticated literary discourse.

Díaz is a popular writer who perpetuates stereotypes of Latin hypermasculinity and gross sexism under the masked guise of irony. Does he suppose that the masses pick up on the subtleties of his irony? Or is he merely reinforcing the patriarchal experience of his readers and telling a ripping yarn? Further, if he is so critical of Dominican masculinity then why is his work so celebrated in the DR? The worst part might be that, like the dynamics of hipster sexism, perhaps consumers think that they are on the right side of the argument, pointing out the troglodytes instead of realizing they are one.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, rather than unabashedly criticizing the culture of homosexual hypermasculine anti-queerness, Díaz appears to revel in it. As Ignacio López-Calvo notes, “The recollection of so many of the rumors, anecdotes, and legends about what Yuniór humorously calls the ‘worlds first culocracy’ ... undoubtedly responds not only to the fascination of Dominicans with this larger-than-life historical character but also to that of the author” (80). As a result “what Yuniór succeeds in doing is merely reinstating the very standards of masculinity and Dominicanness that alienate Oscar and himself” (Sáez 552).

Perhaps the proof is in the unabashed warm reception of the book by the very folks Díaz claims to criticize. Aligned with other novels by Latin writers that critique Latin culture, Díaz’s work earns suspicion: “Take the case of John Rechy, whose 1963 novel, *City of Night*, a book about hustlers, whores, drugs, and urban criminality, garnered him accolades and a reputation as one of the most promising Chicano writers of his generation. Shortly thereafter, Rechy’s book was categorized as a ‘gay novel,’ a stigma that tarred the book for Hispanic readers in the United States” (Stavans 156). Díaz’s work is the opposite of a “gay novel.”

Díaz's novel is more like those institutions that attempt to pray the gay away, a queer corrective. Further,

Considering this unfettered portrayal of Dominican society, and especially if we take into account the harsh reception that Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) had in the Dominican Republic, it is somewhat surprising that on May 1, 2008, the Dominican *cámara de diputados* officially named Díaz "cultural ambassador of the Dominican Republic in the world" and that he was also acknowledged by the *Secretaría de Estado de Cultura* during Santo Domingo's International Book Fair. (López-Calvo 77)

This is the problem with employing irony as your single most important literary device. Those who might benefit most from its putative tertiary meaning do not get it, or simply refuse to. Instead they appropriate its face value. According to David Foster Wallace,

irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks ... It is unmeaty ... an ironist is *impossible to pin down*. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit 'I don't really mean what I'm saying.' So what *does* irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? ... Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like an hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too successful rebel: the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *subject* is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself. (67-68)

In the end it does not matter what Díaz *intended* to do. As Slavoj Žižek *points out*, “The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask ... they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (29). *Further*, “*even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them*” (33).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word *hip* “comes from a story of a fisherman warning young fishermen never to wade in deep water without hip boots on because they could run into trouble. So, when you hear the words, ‘I’m hip’ or ‘I’m booted’ it’s said to let you know they have no fear of trouble or that they understand what’s shaking [i.e., happening].” There is no doubt that on some level, the implied author Díaz was wearing his hip boots while writing the three books under examination. It does not matter. These three works espouse a construction of masculinity symbolized by the masked man No Face, who hides his queerness by adopting a hypermasculine anti-queer pose. The implied author’s construction of Yuniors as narrator and chief creates yet another mask. In this case Yuniors is the No Face representing the hidden identity of the implied author. In this employ, Yuniors thwarts Oscar’s queerness and welcomes him into the martyred realm of No Face masculinity. Ultimately then, Díaz’s work is only so much hipster sexism, involuted bravura, not unlike a really clever internet meme.

Notes

¹ Michael S. Kimmel defines hypermasculinity as a form of U.S. American masculinity based on racism, sexism, and homophobia and marked by violent rapaciousness (191-92). Riki Wilchins equates hypermasculinity with “emotional toughness and sexual virility” (114). Charles P. Toombs notes, “super-masculinity” stems from “the

dominant culture's superficial and inauthentic definitions of manhood and masculinity," resulting in "a lack of tolerance, respect, or acceptance of difference" (109-10).

- ² I am using Wilchins' definition of "queerness," meaning "things like power and identity, language, and *difference*" (5, emphasis mine). In this sense any behavior that challenges white patriarchal heteronormativity is *queer* behavior.
- ³ Wayne Booth defines this term as "always distinct from the 'real man'... a superior version of himself, a 'second self,' as he creates his work" (151).
- ⁴ "Hipster Sexism consists of the objectification of women but in a manner that uses mockery, quotation marks, and paradox" (Quart). The ostensible goal is to underscore the egregiousness and ridiculousness of sexism itself rather than to simply perpetuate it.
- ⁵ The similarity in the names "Ysrael" and "Yunior" is worth noting.
- ⁶ This quote is from the epigraph in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, just before section two.
- ⁷ It would be interesting for someone to explore the similarities between the work of Ernest Hemingway and Junot Díaz in terms of both authors possibly employing macho archetypes ironically. The similarities in the titles *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is unavoidable. Hemingway nearly lost his canonicity due to the macho zeitgeist that pervades his work, a charge that was later challenged by new readings of *The Sun Also Rises*, *To Have and Have Not*, and especially his posthumous works. Perhaps Díaz will experience a reverse fate.

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