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**Tara Boulos y Carmen Cañete Quesada: “Masculinity and Hybrid Identity in Yúnior, Oscar and Other Dominican *tígueres* in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*”<sup>1</sup>**

[Translated by Mauricio J. Almonte and Carmen Cañete Quesada]

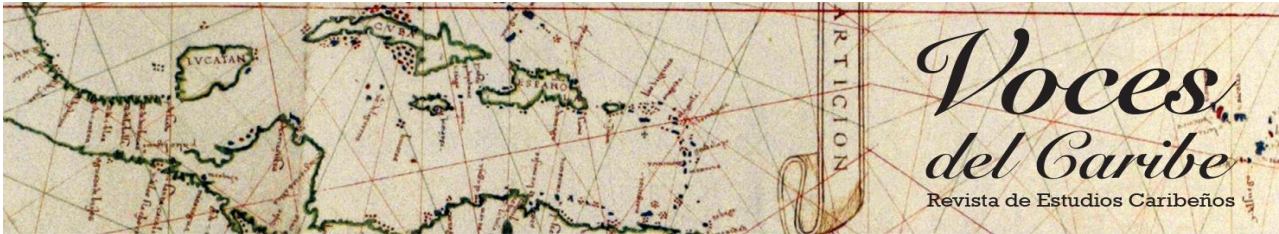
The use of various genres and narrative styles that destabilize any normalizing attempt to define and thus restrain a particular mode of writing, along with a questioning of static definitions of Dominican identity, are both playful and palpable in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Dominican-American author Junot Díaz (b. 1968). Science fiction, film, videogames, popular music, hip-hop culture, superheroes, comic strips, television shows and other regulars of the author’s narrative universe, come together in this literary feast.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* unites the fleeting joys of popular culture with narrative modes of greater literary rigor, at times historical, autobiographical and academic, both on the main text and within the universe of footnotes that pervade the narrative. Here, the humorous often oscillates between the bitter, the candid, the perverse, the beautiful and the coarse, giving shape to characters whose lives unfold between similarly contrasting landscapes: the Caribbean island of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of the essay entitled “Masculinidad e hibridez cultural en Yúnior, Óscar, y otros *tígueres* dominicanos de Junot Díaz,” which was published in the *CLAJ* (*College Language Association Journal*) 55.2 (Dec 2011): 173-90.





Quisqueya, and the North East area of the United States which is home to more than a million and a half Dominicans.

But Díaz does more than challenge the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable through his less-than-conventional narrative form and style. The bulk of his protagonists witness the daily confrontations between two seemingly irreconcilable cultures: the Hispanic and the Anglo-American. Youngsters like Oscar Cabral and Yunior de las Casas face the nearly permanent dilemma of whether or not to adopt behavioral patterns modeled by family members, neighbors and friends, something that would simultaneously strengthen masculinity and national identity. For these characters, then, to reclaim a Caribbean identity forces them to perform traditional gender roles they have accepted almost by inertia.

According to an insightful study performed by Dominican sociologist E. Antonio Moya, males in the Dominican Republic are highly aware, at a very young age, of the type of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that can call into question their masculinity (72). As Moya concludes, hyper-masculinity in this Caribbean nation is inextricably tied with an attempt to sustain a hegemonic system based on a handful of values that serve to perpetuate supremacy of males in spheres of power (99). Furthermore, this tradition lives from generation to generation, and subjects young





males to an absolute vigilance that seeks to eradicate gestures and expressions deemed suspect, or effeminate (72-73).

In the case of the generations of Dominicans born and/or raised in the United States, this formative process is relatively more intense as a result of, among other reasons, the tensions that arise between inherited customs and those acquired from the adoptive homeland. In light of this observation, to which we will return shortly, the self-awareness as Dominicans in culturally hybrid beings causes conflicts within their respective personalities, and consequently, their relationships with the communities that coexist in the North-American mainstream. Let us use the two aforementioned characters as examples. Oscar is a less-than-manly young man, sexually inexperienced, physically repulsive, and completely lacking any charisma or suitable skills with which to attract young women. The ensuing frustration is sublimated within the pleasures associated with reading, videogames and science fiction. And Yuniór, despite a public persona as a rough and insensitive man, sure of himself, an abuser and trickster of women, is really another “nerdy” type with proclivities and literary tastes very similar to Oscar’s. Understandably, perhaps, the artistic tendencies of these protagonists amount to a transgression of traditional gender roles established by the patriarchy. Though Díaz himself asserts that, “masculinity is so tied up in not being smart” (“Junot Díaz: Writer, Tigre” 48), these diasporic young men reclaim their Dominican side from





an intellectual perspective, a point of view that may well owe to their relatively greater access to education and technological advances.<sup>2</sup>

The culture of capitalism and the free market, with its center in the United States, supported by film, television and, more recently, the internet, has an impact on the sexual behavior of these diasporic young men not shared by their island counterparts. In fact, traditionally “masculine” customs on the island, such as the practice of a given sport or romancing young women, lose value in the suburban setting in which both Oscar and Yunion were raised during the decade of 1980. What is more, general concerns over matters of insecurity, particularly a high rate of delinquency in urban New Jersey,<sup>3</sup> greatly increases the amount of time these characters spend indoors; something that informs the habits and preference for television programs, videogames, and comic books featuring various superheroes.

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<sup>2</sup> Díaz explains that intellectual practices were not welcomed during Trujillo’s regime given the rigorous control of public opinion: “The Reign of Trujillo was not the best time to be a lover of Ideas, not the best time to be engaging in parlor debate, to be hosting tertulias, to be doing anything out of the ordinary, [...]” (*The Brief* 214). For this reason Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard del Cabral, was “an exceedingly rare species on the Island” for being a prodigious and polyglot surgeon who, given his interest for ethnography, is compared to the Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz (213). His intellectual side deteriorates even more his problems with the regime, which accuses him of being a homosexual and a communist.

<sup>3</sup> Violence is frequent in the urban scenery where Oscar, Lola, Yunion, Ana Obregón, and many other young characters are portrayed in the novel. A dark walk at 2:00 in the morning was almost lethal for Yunion, who was severely hit by “a bunch of fucking morenos” (*The Brief* 167). Díaz places this incident right after narrating Belicia’s tragic episode at the hands of two murderers right before fleeing the island. None of the two countries –the one of origin and the host land– are able to escape from violence.





Oscar's transformation, from child to adolescent, reflects the sedentary lifestyle characteristic of modernity. The young man's anomalous nature includes his obsession for reading, particularly everything having to do with science fiction, while the rest of his friends play handball or cause mischief on the street (*The Brief* 20-21). As a Dominican young man, Oscar breaks with all stereotypes: He neither practices sports, nor plays dominoes, nor does he have any dancing or musical skills, nor is he sly, nor does he have any taste in clothing (19-20). Family members convince him that, indeed, he is a failure. The mother makes him go out to the street and play instead of taking refuge at home as a defenseless child. An uncle named Rudolfo invites him to have sex with young women. A sister named Lola suggests a change of outfit, so as to highlight manliness. Yuniór encourages him to visit public spaces typically associated with men. The author himself analyzes the causes that keep the protagonist from his masculine condition; a possible reason, put forth in a footnote, is the abrupt displacement from one cultural space to a highly different one, "a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)" (*The Brief* 21-22).

Oscar and Yuniór's education level, which is often masked in various ways, is arguably the novel's greatest contribution to the dismantlement of traditional gender roles. Díaz offers a new path towards a definition of masculinity by positioning at the





center of his novel two young men with attributes uncharacteristic of a stereotypical Dominican male.<sup>4</sup> This feature leads us to the main objective of this essay: to note the sexual behavior of these and other of Díaz's male protagonists and to analyze the response of the author to the prevalent behavioral standards for men in his country of origin. The essay pays particular attention to a term and image of considerable currency in the island, that of the tiger or *tíguere*, which embodies masculinity throughout the national territory. We will focus, then, on the meanings of this often-used image of virility, its variants, and the ways in which Dominican history and culture have shaped its development and trajectory. Of particular interest are the potential conflicts or tensions that may arise when this quasi-national myth is exported to a diasporic setting, and the identification of possible alternatives put forth by Díaz, which serve to discredit or counteract patterns of behavior within Dominican society.

According to Spanish sociologist Josep-Vicent Marqués, the social construction of masculinity includes, “fomentar ciertas posibilidades del individuo varón y amputar o reprimir otras” (20). Belonging to this “prestigioso colectivo,” notes Josep-Vicent, implies compliance with a host of obligations as a male (23). By extension, performing such behavior would bring about the acceptance of this collective, along with prestige

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar's peculiar personality is shown from the first pages: “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats 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” (*The Brief* 11).





and social success. To question these processes would be quite hazardous for any person wishing to be considered —and see him/herself— as part of this collective. In the case of Díaz, who was born and spent part of his infancy in the city of Santo Domingo before moving to the United States, where he became a writer, inherited traditions are an extremely important component not only of his identity but also of other Dominican-Americans aware of their cultural foundations. Nonetheless, and in relation to traits of masculinity, although Díaz may not share or promote the patriarchal practices to which he had been exposed as a child, he likely knows the pitfalls involved in efforts to dismantle ingrained notions of masculinity while remaining faithful to his Dominican roots.

The author's concern with these behavioral norms can be traced to the creation and trajectory of Yunior from his first appearance in *Drown* (1997) until he reaches maturity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In an interview with Professor Ilan Stavans, Díaz highlights a few contradictions within Yunior's behavior, a character that could arguably be Díaz's *alter ego* given the numerous similarities between the two:

I grew up in a community where the men I knew... sure we had a lot of crap on us, but from the start, most of it, most of the stuff that I saw from the men was taking advantage of and being abusive to women. [...] We have Yunior who is a nice young kid in some ways. He feels very





Volumen 7, Número 1

Primavera 2016

powerfully towards his mother, dreams powerfully about his missing father and looks up to his older brother who is in place of the father teaching him how to be a boy, you know,...but then he comes to realize as he meets his father that his father is very abusive to his mother and his brother gets into abusive relationships with girls. And he's young and he goes: "Yo, I don't really want that in my life". He is conflicted. And yet, by the time he is a late teenager or in early twenties, he's become exactly the male that he didn't want to be as a young person. And he himself can't imagine how it happened, but it just happens. And I think that watching this construction and watching this occur...this sort of conflicts you have, a person that... you love your mother... let's say you know, but you become exactly the kind of male who used to victimize his mother [...]. (Díaz, "Conversation with")

Although in this interview Díaz affirms that the treatment of masculinity in *Drown* came about through a less-than-enjoyable experience, the theme occupies a central role of undeniable importance in his creative work. As the author notes, a series of experiences lead the young Yunior ("How to Date a Browngirl Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," "Negocios") to become the type of mean-spirited person Yunior himself had







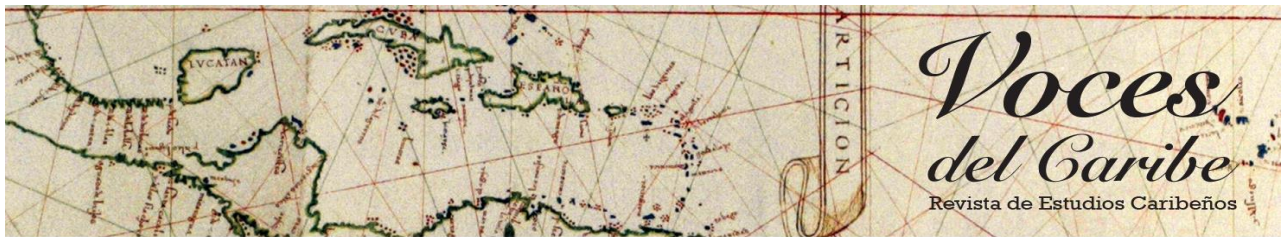
repudiated during infancy (“Ysrael,” “Fiesta, 1980,” “Aguantando”).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if we trace a chronological line from the character’s inaugural appearance in *Drown* to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, we observe a clear transposition of roles of these protagonists. The young Yunior learns to be a man by imitating the behavior modeled by his brother Rafa, an insensitive and perverse person whose way of being in the world is, in turn, a poor imitation of an unfaithful and abusive father with whom he has had a very limited relationship. Over time, Yunior ends up adopting these two models. When Yunior meets Oscar, he tries to pervert, or convert him, as if to steer Oscar away from the hazards involved with the type of “asexual” attitude Yunior himself exhibited as a child.

Oscar, on the other hand, undergoes a transformation that is diametrically opposed to that of Yunior. Though at the young age of seven he declares his love for Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco (*The Brief* 13), Oscar suffers a sexual setback soon after that idyllic and short-lived *ménage à trois* comes to an end. Despite being raised, like Yunior, without a father as a role model, “to show him the masculine ropes” (*The Brief* 15), Oscar becomes a shy young man, inclined to easily fall in love, and quixotic,

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<sup>5</sup> Other short stories —not included in *Drown*— where Yunior is the narrator are: “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” (1998), “Nilda” (1999) and “The Pura Principle” (2010), all three published in *The New Yorker*.





without any malice towards anyone, particularly women.<sup>6</sup> Adopted models of romantic relationships come to Oscar via the books he reads and the movies he often watches; it is precisely the empathy that he develops through his creative side that keeps him from adopting and performing the role of insensitive and immature *macho* that is all-too-visible in the case of Yunior.

The abusive behavior exhibited by the adult Yunior keeps him from any healthy or stable relationship. His romantic flings with Oscar's sister, Lola, his only true love, never reached a satisfactory end because of his inability to, "keep my rabo in my pants" (*The Brief* 311). Even years following Oscar's death, when Yunior appears to have formalized the relationship with his wife, "a negrita from Salcedo whom I do not deserve," he continues to practice (albeit to a lesser degree) infidelity (326). His overly active sexual life stands in sharp contrast to that of his roommate, Oscar, a shy and inexperienced young man whom Yunior persists in converting into a full man. With the complicity that unites them as fellow Dominicans, Yunior insists on the importance of having an active sexual life, "I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican

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<sup>6</sup> According to John Riofrío the poverty of Dominican families who emigrate to the North causes a void in the sexual development of young Dominicans who have grown up without the presence of the father: "The absence of the father figure and the perpetual reality of abandonment which accompanies this absence oblige the generation of fatherless boys to construct their own vision of masculinity based, not only on the island's remaining men, but also the hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind" (26). Unlike Rafa and Yunior, however, Oscar betrays that manly behavior by seeking refuge in a nostalgic and selfless relationship with the prostitute Ybón Pimentel.





male has ever died a virgin” (174). And as if this ran against the will of a higher power, he warns Oscar that, “it’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (174). In his own pro-feminist approach, and with a bitter humor that characterizes Díaz, the author draws attention to all the women —his own mother included— who are victimized by Dominican men. Yunior is similarly aware of this tendency, and is accepting of the self-criticism, although this does not lead him to stop engaging in polygamous practices, which he understands as an inherent quality of his breed, “What I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab. But if you thought I was going to do that, then you don’t know Dominican men” (*The Brief* 175).

According to Marqués, the “desprecio a las mujeres, el culto a la fuerza o el gusto por la transgresión,” are common among the behavioral and discursive hyper-masculine practices of adolescence, particularly when young men act as a gang (25). In this early introductory stage of sexual behavior, it is typical to exaggerate manly conduct by way of “imitación mala e insegura” so as to go beyond the necessary quota, or “las normas del ingreso en el club” (26). De Moya interprets this immature behavior, so frequent in Dominican men —and exhibited by Rafa, Yunior, Ramón and other character’s of Díaz’s creation—, as a reaction to the “irrational fear of becoming a woman” (98). Fear of being identified with the opposite sex pushes these men to adopt and perform a way of being that is meticulously heterosexual, and at times to





aggrandize manly appearance by way of repeated acts of violence and transgression. Consequently, this apprehension frequently gives rise to misogynistic and homophobic behaviors.

De Moya's observations are notably useful when analyzing the personality of an adult Yuniór and other characters in *Drown*. The narrator of the eponymous short story, "Drown," for example, finds himself involved in a sentimental relationship with his friend Beto, with whom he used to have fun breaking windows and urinating on the front steps of other people's houses (*Drown* 91), and shoplifting at shopping centers (97). When the relationship takes a turn toward unknown territory, the unnamed protagonist panics but nevertheless continues with this homosexual relationship, which he does not recognize as such, "Mostly I stayed 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). This nameless character bares a striking resemblance to Yuniór. We know of his interest in reading (94), his habit of running in the morning (99-100); and further, that his father, much like Ramón de las Casas, lives in the United States (101). To all these points in common, we should add the silent quality of the mother (94), which easily reminds us of Virtudes Díaz ("How (In a Time of Trouble)" 158); and his tendency to play hookie by taking refuge at the Sayreville library (102),





similarly to what the author used to do when he lived in New Jersey (“How (In a Time of Trouble)” 158).

Several aspects of “Drown” distinguish it from the rest of the short stories in the collection, and these differences make the text the central piece of the book. In the first place, and despite the similarities mentioned above, it is the only story that features an openly homosexual character. On the other hand, and unlike other characters, the unnamed narrator does not appear in other stories, and is one of the very few who is not named. It is quite significant that Díaz places this story right in the middle of his collection, and furthermore, that the title of the story also names the book, *Drown*.<sup>7</sup> All these gestures call attention to the homosexual anecdote of “Drown,” which renders it unlikely to be overlooked by the reader. Inherent contradiction aside, this challenge to the patriarchy —having engaged in a homosexual act with Beto on two separate occasions— does not lead to a renunciation of his Dominican identity. The protagonist will continue to be loyal to the “pacto entre varones” (Marqués 25) that helps to guarantee his virility and membership in this particular collective. In no way, for instance, do these “deviant” sexual experiences keep him from engaging in acts of

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<sup>7</sup> The Spanish edition of *Drown*, entitled *Negocios*, loses the meaning of the English version since it refers to the last and longer story about Ramón de las Casas’ life. It is symbolic the fact that in this and other editions prepared for a Spanish-speaking reader (like the one published in Spain entitled *Los boys*) the homosexual anecdote has been displaced from the center of attention, thus avoiding mentioning this story in the cover of the book. The original title, however, was maintained in the Portuguese version entitled *Afogado*.





vandalism, and during nights of partying, ridiculing a group of “faggots” in a bar (“Drown” 103). Having performed a sexual act with another man leads him to dramatize even more his degree of manliness, something that suggests that homosexuality and hyper-masculinity are two sides of the same coin.

Although the certain behaviors among men are socially repressed, while others are promoted (Marqués 20), specific norms vary according to standards set in each country. In the Dominican Republic, for example, the image of a triumphant *macho* was strengthened in 1844 when the nation declared its independence from Haiti. National pride in the newly established republic, coupled with totalitarian practices of ensuing governments led, almost a century later, to the rise to power of Rafael L. Trujillo (1930-61). Trujillo reinforced the idea of a Dominican masculinity, using as a primary model the image of the respectable father, a hardworking protector of familial ties, an image that pointed to himself as patriarch of the entire nation. With the power this position entailed, this notable tyrant, assassin, extortionist, and rapist of young women, but simultaneously a generally conservative and ultra-Catholic father, came to embody values of a prosperous and civilized society.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interesting facts about the well-known extramarital activities of the “Father of the New Patria” to reaffirm his presence in power can be found in Derby’s study, “The Dictator’s Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle During the Trujillo Regime.”





It is precisely within this period of masculine hegemony, that the *tíguere*, an image often employed to visualize the idiosyncrecies of Dominican men, enjoyed its greatest popularity. According to Dominican journalist and historian Lipe Collado, and despite the nuances that he contributes to the definition of the term, the feline represents “un ser social peculiar, de estilo y sicología propios” (14). Owing, perhaps, to the fierceness of this animal, its savage nature, its cunning and agility with which to entrap its prey, the *tíguere* became an allegory of Dominican masculinity: his physical strength, verbal prowess, ability for leadership, unpolished character and practical intelligence, opportunism, etc. As such, according to Collado, the *tíguere* has contributed, for good or for bad, to the distinctive image of the Dominican male as, “son dueños de ‘un tono’, de un estilo personal que los distingue de los demás hispanoamericanos y –añadiría yo ahora– de los demás seres de la Tierra... (17). These “rasgos comunes [del *tíguere*] extendidos por toda la geografía nacional,” (27) are easily recognizable in two triumphant male figures of Trujillo’s regime: the “generalissimo” himself, father of the motherland, and playboy Porfirio Rubirosa, at one point a son-in-law of the Dominican tyrant following his wedding with Flor de Oro, and famous for his virile attributes, social skills, and tactics at seducing women. Collado affirms, with a tone that oscillates between cynical and burlesque, that both men are the best examples of the *tíguere* to be found in Dominican national history, and as such,





best define, “los ‘parámetros’ más definidos del tíguere y de la cultura del tigueraje [...]” (167).<sup>9</sup>

The negative consequences of this *tíguere* of multiple faces appear in Díaz’s novel through these and other males who, for decades, sustained Trujillo in power. The very generalissimo appears linked to the unquestionable *fukú americanus*, a curse that befell the New World following Christopher Columbus’ arrival (*The Brief* 1-2). Trujillo is the first Dominican male mentioned in the novel, and is described in highly detailed fashion in a footnote —the first one—, which, given its extent and content could be considered a text in and of itself. Rubirosa similarly receives notable attention during the first pages of the novel, as a comparative point of reference within descriptions of the young Oscar’s “normal” behavior, an untiring dancer who had acquired, at only seven years old, the style of a true Casanova, “Because in those days he was (still) a ‘normal’ Dominican boy raised in a ‘typical’ Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike” (*The Brief* 11). Oscar’s own mother figures among the chief cheerleaders of the young protagonist’s behavior, as she proudly remembers the actions of her son before undergoing that strange transformation, both physical and within his personality: “You should have seen him,

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<sup>9</sup> In this sense Collado follows a common tradition in Latin America, adopting a subject or masculine “type” as national archetype that could represent the assumed genuineness and peculiarity of a particular *pueblo*. Well known examples include the Puerto Rican *jibaro*; the Argentine *gaucho*; and the Mexican *charro*, all of them then described with qualities similar to those of the Dominican *tíguere*.



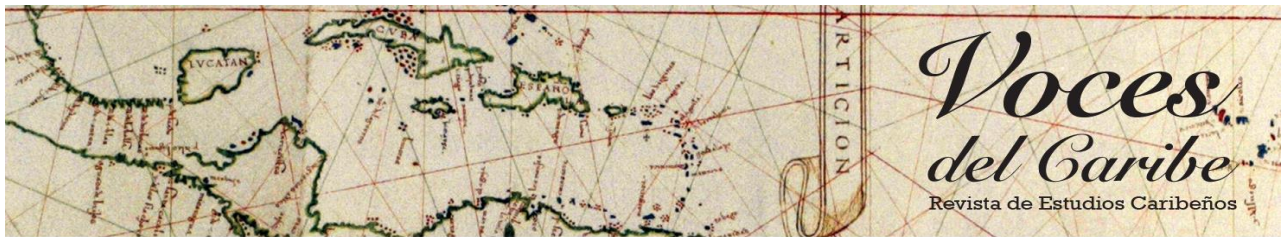




his mother sighed during her Last Days. He was our Porfirio Rubirosa” (12). The narrator takes advantage of the reference to inform his readers, in another extensive note —footnote 4— about the history and nature of the famous Rubi, “the third-most-famous Dominican in the world,” following Trujillo and the actress María Montez (12). Dominican Yorkers such as Oscar feel indebted to the traditions, heavily informed by male chauvinism, that their parents cling to in the diaspora, as a nostalgic way of cultural vindication. And many of these traits of national identity are intricately tied to cultural practices and beliefs promoted by Trujillo, a historical stigma that remains a relevant force in the Dominican psyche, within and beyond national borders, “I always say to my mother, it’s like Trujillo was part of the family. As though here we have my father, here are my four brothers and sisters, and there sits the damned Mr. Dictator” (Díaz, “A Conversation with” 45).

Other *tígueres* closely associated with the dictator transform the destiny of the Cabral family, particularly that of Hypatía Belicia Cabral, Oscar’s mother. Jack Pujols, the son of a colonel in Trujillo’s air force and of European ancestry, steals Hypatía’s virginity and subsequently abandons her. Her second great love was the Gangster, a businessman and Trujillo’s brother-in-law, as well as a hired assassin and associate of the regime, who impregnated Belicia and soon made arrangements for her to be so severely beaten that she lost the child and was left for dead in a sugar cane field. These





and other episodes in Beli's life, which transpire from 1955 until she escapes to the United States in 1962, are contextualized in the novel through the lives of historical characters, invariably men, and portrayed as the chief source of inspiration for a series of despotic and sexist policies. Among them are Ramfis Trujillo, the oldest of the dictator's son —footnote 13—; Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo's personal friend and protégé —footnote 25—; and the blood thirsty Johnny Abbes García, the director of Trujillo's Military Intelligence Service (SIM) and an unscrupulous murderer —footnote 14.

During this dark period in the history of the Dominican Republic, a policy of terror coupled with hyper-masculine practices undoubtedly fed the myth of Dominican *macho*. And although Collado himself repeatedly denounces such behavioral practices, he does not manage to free himself of these in his search for that which is Dominican. Nonetheless, and despite the male-centered premises that inform this sociological approach, Collado's treatment of the topic proves to be interesting from an ethnicity point of view. For Collado the linguistic and historical origin of this icon, the so called *tíguere*, is closely tied to the neighboring country. The Haitian troops that occupied the Dominican Republic, from 1822 to 1844, began to employ the term, “para designar a los jóvenes que deambulaban libremente haciendo y deshaciendo, sobreviviendo con sus propias garras” (Collado 24). The author links this feline creature to the disorder





and opportunism that ensued following the armed conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic; and later alludes to the French colonial authorities —true *tígueres*, according to him— that sacrificed innocent slaves, decades earlier, in the name of greed (25). Nor does Collado ignore the peculiar pronunciation of the term, which comes very close to the way in which Haitians pronounce the Spanish word “tigre” in Kreol, that is, dragging the “r.”

Considering that the acknowledgement of the Haitian within the Dominican Republic is problematic from both the ethnic and cultural points of view, the relationship between this image and Haiti put forth by Collado proves remarkably powerful. As it relates to Dominican sexual identity, the Haitian acquires notable strength due to common stereotypes surrounding the alleged masculine prowess of men of color. For these reasons, it is probable that the fact that this linguistic Haitianism has survived for numerous decades without morphing into its Spanish form, “tigre,” is due to the sexual charge associated with the African, reclaimed by Dominicans in order to strengthen the image of an energetic and vigorous people.

In the case of Diaz’s protagonists, one would have to add an equally important element in the North-American context to the correlation between degree of virility and ethnic blackness. For the Dominican diaspora, masculinity is heavily associated with economic status, something that is personalized in the image of the middle-class Anglo-





American subject, to which immigrants can aspire to become. In his analysis of U.S. society, sociologist Michael D. Kimmel affirms that, “Dentro de la cultura dominante, la masculinidad que define a los blancos, de clase media, adultos jóvenes heterosexuales, es el modelo que establece los *standards* para otros hombres, en base al cual se miden otros varones y, al que, más comúnmente de lo que se cree, ellos aspiran” (50). This point helps to explain why Oscar, obsessed with acquiring the hyper-masculine appearance of his cousins, decides to modify his body by erasing every single sign of African ancestry. Uncomfortable in his own skin, Oscar vanishes the curly hairs on his body, shaving his afro and mustache. Nor is it strange that he adopts as a role model the Panamanian boxer Roberto Durán, who appears much more European than most Dominican boxers and baseball players (Díaz, *The Brief* 30). Oscar’s condition as a poor immigrant distances him from dominant culture, particularly that of Anglo America, and diminishes his masculinity and all possibility of leadership.

An even clearer case of the close relationship between ethnicity, marginality and masculinity appears in the short story entitled, “How to Date Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie.” The advice put forth by an adult Yunion reflects the behavior of the heterosexual male described above. In order to have relative success during his dates, the narrator hides not only the cheese that government agencies provide to low-





income families, but also the old family pictures featuring life in a rural setting as well and the narrator's afro (149; 143). The narrator similarly suggests altering certain gestures and ways of speaking, "Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa" (145). It is precisely these habits, borrowed from the dominant culture —what Kimmel terms, "masculinidad hegemónica" (51)—, that allow Yuniór to adopt a position of power vis-à-vis young women belonging to a different ethnic group and/or social condition.

This character, sketched out in *Drown*, becomes remarkably rich and complex when he appears next to Oscar in the novel. It is then that we discover Yuniór's weakness for the world of letters. Despite his irreverent language —"fucking" as his pet word— and his condition as a rebellious and "anti system" youngster, Yuniór has much in common with Oscar. His interests for reading and writing prompts him to enroll in the Literature Department, to live in the area that is home to writers, and to share living quarters with Oscar, toward whom he feels anger and recognizes the embarrassment of his own condition. But his passion for writing is greater than his fear of assimilating to the group of "weirdos and losers and freaks and fem-bots" (*The Brief* 168) with whom he ends up living, a fact that the narrator justifies with his interest in Lola. But the truth is that Yuniór similarly enjoys books and movies dealing with





science fiction, and even confesses that he shared on more than one occasion his literary “secret” with Oscar, exchanging one of his short stories (173).

Without a doubt, literature is the meeting point, or magnet, for these two characters who attract and repel one another simultaneously. In this sense, Oscar and Yuniór almost seem to represent a single ambiguous person in the midst of a conflict with himself. Díaz, moreover, is quite familiar with the common obstacles in this environment, those which distracted him from dreams and aspirations during adolescence. He himself experienced the absence of a father and lived with a brother who was terminally ill from leukemia in a New Jersey suburb that was inhospitable and hostile towards immigrants of color (Díaz, “How” 155-57). The author also recalls feeling uncomfortable about his physique and morals, his failure in school, his work delivering pool tables, and the heated arguments with his mother Virtudes, the only source of moral support at the time (156-59). This personal experience is undoubtedly related to the creation of his fictional character, Yuniór, and similarly with the “ghetto nerd” (157)—Oscar—a fan of Steven King novels and *Doctor Who* (161). If we accept this splitting of a single personality, Yuniór would represent the public persona who has managed to captivate a white North American elite with considerable editorial success, while Oscar would constitute the darker and more intimate side of the author. It is important to note, that if Yuniór does achieve general acceptance and social





success, this is possible only with the presence of Oscar (his other half) whom he manages to represent with the degree of sincerity and spontaneity that are forbidden in the hostile environment surrounding him.

Yunior and Oscar are extensions of the author's life; as such, Díaz is complicit in their masculine behaviors that destabilize the myth. These and other Dominican-Americans are aware of the cultural past that, despite limiting their masculinity, also helps them to define themselves within the Dominican diaspora. Throughout this essay, we have shown how hyper-masculine practices are closely tied to the fear, on the part of Dominican men, to be identified as a woman, and of discovering within oneself the possibility of a homosexual tendency that could diminish social prestige. In his effort to dismantle this social stigma, Díaz recreates this Dominican Oscar Wilde; he is a quixotic being, both sensitive and intelligent who lives in his own world of romantic dreams and ideals. But in discrediting the Dominican *macho*, Díaz apparently did not foresee a remarkably powerful argument with which to further parody the legend of the *tíguere*, which is kept very alive in biographies of men who are immortalized by the masses. If it is true that the legend has reinforced belief in the alleged masculine prowess of figures such as Trujillo, rumors assert that the dictator engaged in bisexual





Volumen 7, Número 1

Primavera 2016

acts with equally renowned and influential public figures.<sup>10</sup> Oscar dies for love, the only sincere love that exists in the novel. His honesty symbolizes the clarity of mind typical of this character, the only character, in fact, who manages to confront his fears and complexes by living against the grain.

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<sup>10</sup> The political exile from Galicia, José Almoína, who for many years was Trujillo's personal secretary and confidant of the family, assures that he used to satisfy his "bisexual impulses" with men of his confidence like Manuel de Moya Alonzo, who was the first governor and Secretary of State since 1953; and also with the president of the University of Santo Domingo, Julio Vega Batlle (31). Among other eccentricities, according to rumors made public, he used to put make up on his face to lighten his complexion and to use silk panties as underwear.







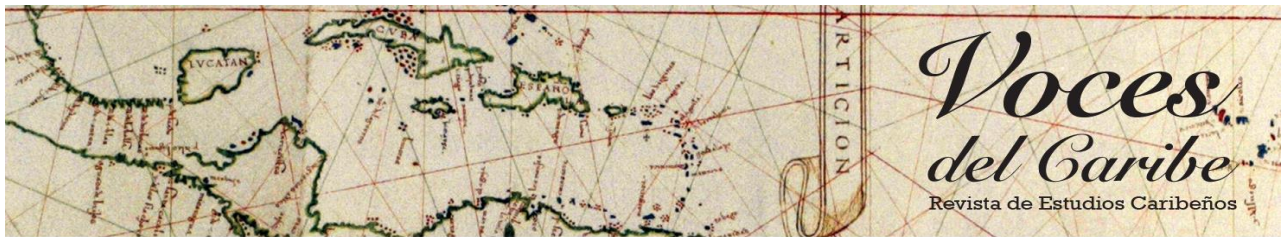
Volumen 7, Número 1

Primavera 2016

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Volumen 7, Número 1

Primavera 2016

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