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# The Stories of Junot Díaz: Genre and Narrative in Drown and This Is How You Lose Her

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The Stories of Junot Díaz: Genre and Narrative in *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how Junot Díaz creates and constructs his literary alter-ego and narrator, Yunion de las Casas, and examines the social and cultural aspects, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, that condition or influence Yunion's construction. I argue that Díaz uses the short story as a subversive genre and modernist narrative techniques, such as shifts in space-time and focalization, to reflect Yunion's diasporic, fragmented subjectivity. My analysis includes narratological and generic readings of *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, with a brief look at *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, paying particular attention to Yunion as narrator. Finally, this thesis traces Yunion's construction and development through Junot Díaz's narratives, and this mapping of Yunion's identity explores race, ethnicity, masculinity, and gender as it relates to heteronormative *dominicanidad*.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to J.A. Marin. Also, this thesis is dedicated to Junot Díaz's work, on the page and in the world.

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## Introduction

When Junot Díaz begins his works with an epigraph, he begins a conversation with a previous writer and invites the reader to join in. When he uses Spanish freely without translation in an English text, he asks non-Spanish speakers to look up the words or guess at their meanings and gives Spanish speakers a sometimes funny, sexist, inappropriate, or devastating hybrid language. When Díaz chooses to write short stories, he chooses a genre with certain practicalities and particularities—most importantly, short stories work differently than novels. When he uses modern and postmodern techniques by eschewing quotation marks for dialogue or moving back and forth in time and space, he disorients his readers and asks them to manipulate the text in searching for coherence. When Díaz writes through a first-person narrator, he creates a literary alter-ego who uses narration and language to tell a certain story in a certain way. Junot Díaz uses all of these characteristics—and their extensions, exceptions, antitheses—in his short story collections, *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012).

Using narrative theory, specifically narratology, I examine both of these short story collections and Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) in order to isolate specific instances within the texts that speak to the narratological creation-construction of Yunior de las Casas. Yunior is Díaz's literary alter-ego and a character narrator for all three works of fiction. Since narrative is the principal way that humans organize their understanding of time, examining the narratives of Yunior throughout Díaz's fiction will show his understanding of time and events as he constructs them (Abbott 3).

First, reading Yunior's narratives requires definitions of basic narratological terms. H. Porter Abbott provides the following three distinctions: first, narrative is a representation of events, which includes story and narrative discourse; second, story is an event or sequences of

events, also known as the action; finally, narrative discourse is the story as narrated (15, 19). For example, the *narratives* of Díaz include a *bildungsroman*, an immigrant experience, and an account of adulthood. The *story* of "Fiesta, 1980," from the collection *Drown*, for example, is the story of a party in New York City celebrating the arrival of Yunior's uncle and aunt from the Dominican Republic. The *narrative discourse* of "Fiesta, 1980" includes the violent, neglectful relationship between Yunior and his father, Ramón's infidelity, and the continued absence of Ramon from Yunior's life even though Ramon is physically present.

In addition to analyzing the narrative discourse of Díaz's narratives, my thesis examines Díaz's most inventive and compelling creation, his literary alter-ego Yunior de las Casas. Since the story—events or the action—is always constructed or mediated by narrative discourse—represented action—the narrator holds authority over how the events of the story are told (Abbott 21). Yunior, the narrator for *Drown*, *Oscar Wao*, and *This Is How*, determines how the reader will encounter the action of his narration. For my discussion, I will term the point of view or perspective of the narrator as the focalization, which encompasses more than point of view because focalization is the "position or quality of consciousness through which we 'see' events in the narrative" (Abbott 233). Moreover, focalization can change as characters or positions or quality changes. These changes are sometimes obvious, such as in the case of a difference in age or geography, and sometimes more nuanced, such as the effects of witnessing traumatic violence or the rejection of homosexuality in a heteronormative context. These changes in focalization often correspond with changes or fluidity in the identity of the narrator. David Herman contends, "Although narrators generally believe they have a clear identity, that identity is an accumulation of performative stances and memories of past experiences which creates a continuity of self-understanding between roles and between contexts" (261). Yunior, thus, is an amalgamation of

social and cultural performances with memories of past experiences, which lead him to believe that he knows who he is.

Few critics have written about the use of genre and narrative in Junot Díaz's two short story collections, and this project aspires to fill these critical gaps. While several critics explore *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by investigating the narrator, Yuniors, these explorations do not represent a thorough look into Yuniors as a narrator because *Oscar Wao* concerns the de León family and not the de Las Casas family. In other words, in the two short story collections, Yuniors narrates himself and his family history, which I argue provides a more personal and immediate angle on his construction and representation. Although my concern is mainly with *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, my analysis, however, will tangentially explore Yuniors's role in *Oscar Wao* because the novel is a link between the short story collections. Analyzing the first words of *Drown* to the final words of *This Is How You Lose Her* through narratology allows a nuanced, comprehensive reading of Yuniors's creation-construction whereas other more specific theories would limit Yuniors's subjectivity to a single critical strand. And since identity is multiple, restricting my analysis would not encapsulate Yuniors's identity. By using narratology, I am better able to focus on the narrator and his narration. Ultimately, my analysis aims to produce a worthwhile reading of Yuniors as he negotiates and navigates his diasporic social, cultural, geographical, and gendered displacement.

First, the chapter on *Drown* looks at the poetics of narrative fluidity in the collection: in other words, the fluid structures in narrative discourse, such as shifts in focalization and in time and space, that contribute to the construction of Yuniors's subjectivity. I, specifically, look at "Ysrael," "Fiesta, 1980," "Aguantando," "Drown," and "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" ("How to Date"). In *Drown*, Díaz, first, introduces Yuniors and relates the

creation-construction of Yuniór's identity. An important dynamic in the narrative discourse that influences Yuniór's identity is the relationship between Yuniór and hegemonic Dominican masculinity as practiced by his brother and father. This type of masculinity in a Dominican context is termed *tíguerismo*. According to Danny Mendez, to be a *tíguere* means to flaunt hyper-virility and lack of scruples (127). In "Ysrael" and "Fiesta, 1980," Yuniór is shown as a feminized subject in contrast to his brother and father. "Aguantando" and "Drown" work as a narrative-unit that explores Yuniór's fluid identity as he deals with nostalgic memory and a queer encounter. Next, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" relates a how-to guide to date women of different races and ethnicities. Using Aníbal Quijano's coloniality of power, my analysis explores Yuniór's identity in his interactions with women.

The second chapter on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* posits the novel as an interlude between the collection and as a site of intertextuality that gives more levels of signification to the construction of Yuniór's identity in *Drown*. Part of chapter two focuses on the generic code-switching in *Oscar Wao*. More specifically, this section considers Yuniór's political incorporations of speculative fiction into an American novel about the diasporic family of the de Leóns, a Dominican family cursed by *fukú americanus*, or the Curse of the New World. Further, in this genre discussion, I consider the interpolation of historical footnotes that are written from the focalization of Yuniór as a similar political, subversive move by the author/narrator to promote a narrative different from the metanarratives in Dominican history books. Then, my discussion uses the example of these same footnotes to discuss the function of Yuniór's narration in telling the story of the Cabral and de León family sagas. Here, I link the narration of Yuniór to *zafas*, or counterspells, to the Curse of the New World, because the hegemonic narratives of the Trujillato silence marginalized family histories that are de-centered

through the colonial mindset related to *fukú*—that is, the coloniality of white supremacy, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism. Moreover, citing Maria Lugones, I consider the coloniality of gender and sexuality through the story of Beli's beating. Finally, I conclude this chapter by linking Ysrael, Oscar, and Yuniór and explaining this apocalyptic tripling through intertextualities. These instances of intertexts expose the masks worn by each character, especially the mask of Trujillo worn by Yuniór. Thus, I argue that Yuniór's subversively political narration, his voicing of marginalized narratives, and his intertextual connections with *Drown*, further, shape the identity of Yuniór as he constructs his subjectivity in *Oscar Wao*. Yuniór's identity at the end of the novel changes dramatically from the subject in *Drown*, and his identity experiences more changes in the next collection.

Finally, *This Is How You Lose Her* completes the narrative of Yuniór's subjectivity. In this final collection, Díaz moves seamlessly between focalizations, geographies, etc. as much as he moves seamlessly between his works of fiction. As he did in *Oscar Wao*, Díaz uses intertextualities to link his works together and advances the construction of Yuniór's identity. Using the stories, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," "Nilda," "Miss Lora," and "The Cheater's Guide to Love," I trace how Yuniór moves from the *tíguerismo* model of his brother and father into *sucioness* where he consistently cheats on women and fails to treat women as human. Deborah Vargas is instrumental in my analysis because she gives a nuanced explanation of *sucioness*, which in this context refers to hypersexual Dominican maleness. "Miss Lora," which functions in a similar way to "Drown," relates the events of Yuniór's loss of virginity to a masculine, middle-aged woman. In this story, Yuniór confesses that he is a *sucio*. "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," "Nilda," and "The Cheater's Guide to Love" tell the stories of Yuniór's experiences as a *sucio* until the final story where he attempts to decolonize his heart and his love.

This final chapter approaches a conclusion in Yuniór's identity construction, in which he has come a long way from the nine-year-old boy in *Drown*.

### **Junot Díaz and the Short Story**

Given my emphasis on Díaz's short stories, I will first discuss the significance of his use of short stories as a genre and its critical potential. After writing his most commercially successful work as a novel, Díaz returned to the short story in *This Is How You Lose Her*. Although sometimes seen as apprentice work, the short story as a genre functions differently from the novel, and I argue that Díaz uses the short story as a subversive and political instrument to interrogate hegemonic notions of race, ethnicity, and gender in *dominicanidad* or Dominicaness as they relate to Yuniór's identity.

In particular, Díaz chose short stories to tell Yuniór's narrative. A scholar on short story as genre, Mary Louise Pratt writes, "*The novel tells a life, the short story tells a fragment of a life*" ("The Short Story" 182). The short stories in both collections relate fragments of Yuniór's life. These fragments literally and metaphorically reflect Yuniór's subjectivity. That is, Yuniór's fragmented identity is narrated in fragmented stories.

In addition to fragmentation, Díaz uses the tradition of orality, which is often found in postcolonial literature, most significantly in *Oscar Wao*, but he, also, uses orality throughout his short story collections. Orality in *Drown* emphasizes a retelling of marginalized voices. In *Drown*, the focalization of "Aguantando" narrates the invisible story of Virta's (Yuniór's mother) near nervous breakdown when she receives a promissory letter from Ramón about his return after a five-year absence. Ramón had promised to return two years after he left, and so his most recent letter during the story in "Aguantando" was the second time that he promised his return. The first letter and subsequent betrayal by Ramón resulted in Virta's own abandonment of her

family. Yuniór says, “Mami’s time away was never discussed, then or now. When she returned to us, five weeks later, she was thinner and darker and her hands were heavy with calluses” (*Drown* 84). The narrative discourse of the story concerns Virta’s moment of crisis when she abandons her family for five weeks, presumably to work in the cane fields, while the action of the short story relates a ceaseless and pointless waiting by Rafa and Yuniór. Through Yuniór’s focalization, the small narrative of Virta’s crisis highlights marginalized voices in a postcolonial context.

Also, the narration in “Aguantando” tells the reader that Yuniór, at the age of nine, is illiterate; this is the same Yuniór who during middle age is a creative writing professor at an elite college in the Northeast in *This Is How*. Through the narration, Yuniór discovers that Rafa can read because he read the letter that Ramón sent. When the two boys are sitting in their beds at night, Yuniór says:

Rafa?  
 Yeah?  
 I didn’t know you could read.  
 I was nine and couldn’t even write my own name.  
 Yeah, he said quietly. Something I picked up. Now go to bed. (*Drown* 82)

In “Aguantando,” orality gives Yuniór a voice as an illiterate Dominican boy, which brings his story into written words.

In addition to incorporating orality into his short stories, Diaz uses the short story to better reflect his fragmented, diasporic characters. Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell argue that the fragmented and transient identities of diasporic characters are appropriately represented through the disparate narratives in short story collections (98). The diasporic characters in Diaz's fiction navigate displacement, including internal migration, through nostalgia, repression, or violence. In "Ysrael" and "Aguantando" both Yuniór and Rafa

experience internal displacement during the summers and when Virta no longer has the money to sustain her family in "Aguantando." In "Ysrael," the focalization of Yuniór relates how violence permeates their lives in a displaced space in the campo with their tío. Yuniór says, "Tío Miguel had chores for us (mostly we chopped wood for the smokehouse and brought water up from the river) but we finished these as easy as we threw off our shirts, the rest of the day punching us in the face" (*Drown* 4). The characterization of boredom experienced by two young boys hints at how displacement fragments and disorients identities. The violent climax of the short story when Rafa smashes a glass bottle over Ysrael's head, further, exhibits how displaced characters negotiate their unfamiliar environments.

During a flashback in "Aguantando," at the time that Ramón sent his first letter promising his return, two years after he first left, Rafa and Yuniór constantly ask Virta when Ramón is coming home, and Yuniór's actions mix violence with nostalgia in a way that shows how fragmented characters negotiate absence and displacement. As Yuniór deals with his father's absence, he obsesses over a photograph of Ramon in an attempt to recapture any physical memory of him. Yuniór says, "I am told that I wanted to see his picture almost every day. It's hard for me to imagine myself this way, crazy about Papi. When she refused to show me the photos I threw myself about like I was on fire, and I screamed. Even as a boy my voice carried farther than a man's, turned heads on the street" (*Drown* 83). Further in the narration, Yuniór inconsolably screams louder and starts to tear and destroy his clothes with a nail. Here, Yuniór violently tries to recapture the past, but he does not realize that his image of the past, especially the image or representation of his father, is imaginary. The displacement and absence of Ramón fragments Yuniór's identity.

Another aspect of the short story that Díaz uses is its ability to express liminality and adumbrate taboo subjects. Díaz's investigation into liminality within *dominicanidad* is expressed through his modernist style of incompleteness. Pratt says that despite of the short story's formal experimentation it often introduces new, often stigmatized, subject matters ("The Short Story" 187). Both collections by Díaz introduce new subjects: in *Drown*, alternative masculinity that incorporates homosexuality and in *This Is How*, decolonial love that rejects the colonial mindset found throughout the collections, especially in "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie." Often, the introduction of new subjects, especially taboo subjects, involves guesses by the reader because Díaz uses Joycean gaps and silences. In *Drown*, narrative action involving homosexuality occurs only three times: once in "Ysrael" and twice in "Drown." However, Yuniór's experiences in these episodes profoundly affect his subjectivity.

"The Cheater's Guide to Love" in *This Is How* introduces the new subject of decolonial love, which Yuniór cannot realize until the final pages. Set up as a foil to Rafa's and Ramón's hypermasculinity in *Drown*, Yuniór becomes a *tíguere* in *Oscar Wao* and, most importantly, throughout *This Is How*. Starting with "How to Date" the narration exposes the colonial mindset of Yuniór as he negotiates the dating scene as an Afro-Dominican adolescent in New Jersey. In *Oscar Wao*, a college-aged Yuniór begins to put *tíguerismo* into practice, and in *This Is How*, he continues to follow the mold of hypermasculinity as practiced by his father and brother until "The Cheater's Guide to Love" when he finally views women as human. Thus, Yuniór's identity changes significantly from *Drown* to *This Is How*.

Next, Díaz's use of the short story as it intersects with postcolonial and minor literature helps explore Yuniór's identity construction and the social and cultural aspects that condition it. The epigraph by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Drown* intimates the negotiation between English and

Spanish. As a Cuban-American poet and author of *Living in the Hyphen*, Pérez Firmat sets up Díaz's wrestling with linguistic hybridity. As a Dominican American writer, Díaz chose to write his works for an Anglophone audience but resisted writing entirely in English by inserting untranslated, unitalicized Spanish throughout his collections. Díaz's linguistic code switching prompts English readers either to guess at his meaning or research their meanings; however, as readers attempt to define *tíguere*, *figuerando*, or *tutumpotes* they realize that not only is Díaz code switching in languages but also in registers of class and ethnicity that are appropriate for Yúnior's narration. These terms are not listed in standard Spanish language dictionaries. Rather these terms emerge from the mouths of Dominicans on the island and in the diaspora. In addition to code switching in languages and registers, Díaz attempts a code switching of genres within his short story collections by inserting speculative fiction in stories like "No Face" and "Miss Lora." Díaz's use of genre switching is most prolific in *Oscar Wao* where Oscar de León understands his storyworld through speculative fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Akira*, and *Fantastic Four*.

However, Díaz's most political and most inventive code switching remains in his unique play on Spanglish, which he uses as a political tool of resistance. In an interview, Díaz, speaking about his use of Spanglish, says:

For me allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotations marks a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why 'other' it? Why de-normalize it? By keeping Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. (qtd. in Casielles-Suarez 475)

In Díaz's fiction, he normalizes the hybridity of Spanglish by not translating and not italicizing his Spanish words. Most importantly, he expresses the fluidity of languages. For example,

American literature presupposes that the English language is the norm, but Díaz's fiction, which is also American literature, does not superimpose English over Spanish but acknowledges that Spanish can inhabit English and vice versa.

As shown above, Díaz's use of language in his fiction makes his narratives minor literature. The French authors, Deleuze and Guattari coined minor literature to talk about Kafka's use of Czech in his works. As a speaker of Yiddish, Kafka interpolated different registers of languages into his works of fiction. Yiddish and Czech were not the dominant languages of fiction in his homeland, formerly Austria-Hungary. Since Kafka did not write strictly in the dominant language of German, rather creating a hybrid language of Yiddish, Czech, and German, Kafka used language to subvert fixed power relations. In other words, taking the example of Kafka's Czech as an inhabitation of his literary Prague German, Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka's use of language constitutes a minor use of language that attempts to deterritorialize and unbalance the major language of German. In a similar way, Díaz uses his Dominican Spanish to inhabit a new space within English that constitutes a minor use of language that creates new semantics and syntax in Díaz's fiction. Díaz's Spanglish, then, not only fits the narrator's voice as a diasporic subject but also contributes to an unsettling of dominant power relations between English and Spanish, which permeates throughout the political and subversive discourse of Yuniors' narrations.

## **Conclusion**

Coupling narratology with an analysis of genre in both the short story collections and in the novel allow the reader to best explore Yuniors' identity as it is created and constructed throughout Díaz's fiction. In what follows, I examine Díaz's three published works of fiction in

chronological order, and in each chapter, I explore and further the reader's understanding of the creation-construction of Yuniór's identity.

### Ch. 1: The Poetics of Narrative Fluidity in *Drown*: Time, Space, and Identity

The story of Yunion and its telling explores a poetics of narrative fluidity, and that narrative begins with an epigraph by Gustavo Pérez Firmat that reads:<sup>1</sup>

The fact that I  
 am writing to you  
 in English  
 already falsifies what I  
 wanted to tell you.  
 My subject:  
 how to explain to you that I  
 don't belong to English  
 though I belong nowhere else (1)

Since Pérez Firmat does not write in Spanish, he represents his message as false, and his message explores the fluidity of language and identity. More specifically, his message adumbrates that he belongs *inside* and *outside* of English; he ties his subject(ivity) to language. In other words, Pérez Firmat inhabits Anzaldúa's borderlands.<sup>2</sup> Talking about her Chicana ethnicity, Gloria Anzaldúa says, "ethnic identity is a twin skin of linguistic identity – I am my language" (59). Anzaldúa equates her language to her ethnicity and her identity. In his poetry, Pérez Firmat mimics Anzaldúa's linguistic identity. Thus, his identity like his linguistic proclivities resides in the fluid space between English and Spanish. Danny Mendez adds, "If every speech act implies an act of belonging, those who belong nowhere – or to a number of places – face a crisis of identity whenever they speak, because the language they speak in is, evidently nowhere language. Or everywhere language, a language made up of the pieces of other languages – in short, creole" (125). Mendez, thus, names Pérez Firmat's language a creole language, or an everywhere language, which recognizes the co-habitation of English and Spanish in the Cuban poet's epistemology. Pérez Firmat's bilingualism exists in a contact zone of tension, and the line breaks of the poem exacerbate the tension. The subjectivity of the poet, the "I," is trying to

convince the reader, the “you,” that the “I” truly belongs in either language, but the fastidious “you” cannot accept the paradox. Díaz uses this bilingual consciousness in the epigraph to suggest a theme in *Drown*: a fluidity in languages, registers, and identity. Díaz writes in both English and Spanish and, like Pérez Firmat, his residency in the borderlands—between Dominican and Dominican American, between blackness and whiteness, and between femininity and masculinity—lives in perpetual tension and negotiation.

*Drown* was published in 1996, but the stories that make up the collection date back to Díaz’s graduate school years in the Cornell MFA program. Díaz finished a thesis entitled, “Negocios” (1995), which included seven of the stories eventually published a year later as *Drown*. Also, several stories including “Ysrael,” “Edison, New Jersey,” and “Drown” were previously published in prestigious magazines such as *Story*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*.<sup>3</sup> In *Drown*, Yunion de las Casas narrates six of the ten short stories; however, Díaz hints at the possibility that Yunion in some way narrates all ten short stories.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Julia Alvarez’s middle-class sensibilities, Díaz’s preoccupations include diasporic Dominican characters navigating poverty, transnational displacement, and postcoloniality.<sup>5</sup>

In the first story of the collection, “Ysrael,” Díaz introduces his literary alter-ego and the collection’s narrator, Yunion, and his brother, Rafa. Set in the Dominican Republic, the story uses narrative fluidity to explore the characters’ identities, masculinities, and disabilities. In the final story of the collection, “Negocios,” Yunion’s father, Ramón, returns to the Dominican Republic to bring his family back to the United States where he had been working for the past six years. Thus, Díaz’s narrative circles back to the beginning where the events of “Ysrael” have yet to happen. Between these narrative points, the collection moves seamlessly between the Dominican Republic and the US, between *el campo* and the *Capital*, between Spanish and

English, between heteronormativity and homosexuality. In addition to reading “Ysrael” through a narratological lens, this essay will examine “Fiesta, 1980,” “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,” “Aguantando”, and “Drown.”

The reader reconstructs the stories in *Drown* through the focalization of Yunior, and the reader best understands his subjectivity more than any other character—the reader reads him as the hero or protagonist. Because the reader must reconstruct the stories through Yunior’s perspective, the reader should understand the limits of perspective and the potential manipulation of perspective. Patrick O’Neill explains that “narrative discourse is always potentially subversive both of the story it ostensibly reconstructs and of its own telling of that story” (7). Since Díaz creates the narrative discourse through Yunior’s focalization, the reader can reason that the narrative discourse underlying the action could be a criticism of the face-value story. In other words, the narrative discourse spoken by Yunior—its own telling—and the events or actions in the short stories—the reconstructed stories—function as criticism, or both a fiction and a truth. Mendez cites Díaz to further this idea: “‘*Drown* is a book not about the immigrant experience as much as it’s a how-to guide to building a boy...I will argue that I’m doing something very different than just simply representation’” (qtd. in Mendez 120). Díaz, thus, instructs the reader to read his narrative discourse as a constructed fiction to explore the subjectivity of Yunior. Within this subjectivity, Díaz allows Yunior to subtly undermine the actions and events in the stories of *Drown*.

I argue that *Drown* achieves this subversive interaction between narrative discourse and story through a narrative discourse of fluidity. In this discussion, a narrative discourse of fluidity, or narrative fluidity, refers to the spatiotemporal shifts, the changes in focalization, and the movement of bodies, among other dynamic aspects, of the narrative discourse. I argue,

furthermore, that *Drown* emphasizes fluidity in investigating class, race, and ethnicity as they relate to *dominicanidad*, thus, exposing destructive and normative hypermasculinity as well as the coloniality of power that follows the Dominican diaspora into the US.

### **“Ysrael” and “Fiesta, 1980”**

Peter Rabinowitz terms the beginning and ending of a narrative as privileged positions, and Díaz uses the privileged position of his first story in the collection, “Ysrael,” to introduce the Dominican Republic in the 1970s, Rafa, and, most importantly, Yuniór. The story of “Ysrael” tells how Rafa and Yuniór travel across the *campo*, or rural countryside of the Dominican Republic, to see the disfigured face of Ysrael, who was attacked as an infant by a pig, which left his face horribly mutilated. The two brothers are walking to the store when Rafa decides that they will go visit Ysrael, who wears a hand-sewn mask to cover his mutilated face. Rafa intends to see past the mask and witness Ysrael’s scarred face while Yuniór simply wants to be with his older brother. And so, they travel by bus, without paying the fee, to the town where Ysrael lives. When they find Ysrael, he is flying a kite, which is an American kite that his father, who is working in the US, sent him. Rafa talks to Ysrael about his mask and sniggers at the idea that American doctors will help Ysrael reconstruct his face. Rafa says, “Those doctors will kill you faster than the Guardia” (*Drown* 17). Rafa’s distrust of American doctors stems from his distrust of America as the global north because Ramón abandoned them for the US.

Also, Rafa antagonizes Ysrael because he wants to see his face, which Ysrael keeps hidden. Yuniór, on the other hand, sympathizes with Ysrael and only talks to him about their common interest in wrestling. Yuniór and Ysrael are connecting by talking about wrestling, and Yuniór notices that Ysrael is smiling under his mask. Then, Rafa shatters their connection by smashing a glass bottle over Ysrael’s head. Next, Rafa turns Ysrael over, takes off his mask, and

studies his disfigured face. After, the brothers board a bus back home but then realize that they are going the wrong way, and Rafa tells Yuniór to get ready to run.

Stemming from the plot, the narrative discourse concerns the fluidity of identity in Yuniór as he interacts with Rafa and Ysraél. During the summers, the two brothers live with their tíos in the *campo*. Yuniór, who is nine, spends his time climbing trees and tearing apart lizards while Rafa, who is twelve, spends his time sexually exploiting the girls in the *campo* and telling Yuniór every detail. The two brothers are foils: Rafa is the handsome (read white) older brother and Yuniór is a young Afro-Dominican. Rafa and his *tígueres* insult Yuniór's physical appearance and call him a Haitian, which is Dominican code for an undesired, black body. Yuniór's relationship with Ysraél is more concomitant because both characters stand outside of white Dominican heteronormativity: Yuniór is feminized throughout the story, including by his connection with Ysraél, and Ysraél is a disabled body.

An important part of Dominican heteronormativity is the emphasis on a type of hypermasculinity, which Rafa possesses while Yuniór does not. In addressing masculinity in a Latin American context, Jason Cortés says, "Masculinity is not a monolithic concept, but a historically discontinuous one—a fabrication as it were, of a given cultural circumstance. As an unmarked term and practice, masculinity speaks through its silence, and it is usually deployed as an absence" (1). Cortés links the culturally accepted version of Dominican masculinity to history, specifically the hypermasculinity of the Trujillato to which Díaz hints at throughout the collection. Díaz makes more direct links to hypermasculinity and Trujillo in *Oscar Wao*. Finally, Cortés says that masculinity often works most effectively as a silence or as an absence, and the absent Ramón and silent tíos consent to the hegemonic hypermasculinity that pervades the imagination of Dominican boys, like Rafa and Yuniór, and Dominican men.

In “Ysrael,” the first sentence reads: “We were on our way to the colmado for an errand, a beer for my tío, when Rafa stood still and tilted his head, as if listening to a message I couldn’t hear, something beamed in from afar” (*Drown* 3). Seamlessly incorporating Spanish into stark English prose, Díaz normalizes linguistic code-switching, which gives Spanish just as much—and maybe more—meaning as English and creates a story world of rural poverty and tediously endless days. The word *colmado*, analogous to a convenient store, situates the narrative discourse in the *campo* of the Dominican Republic where the brothers spend summers with their tíos, or uncles. Their tíos take care of the brothers because their mother, whom Yuniór calls “Mami,” ships them to the *campo* during the summers. Their father, whom Yuniór calls, “Papi,” immigrated to the US years before the current narrative time in “Ysrael.” How Yuniór and Rafa respond in their emotional development to their father’s absence prefigures their identity throughout their lives. Yuniór and Rafa’s lives follow disparate trajectories initially, and only later in Díaz’s future collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*, do the trajectories overlap. Thus, the narrator begins separating the identities of the two brothers in the first sentence. Yuniór, unlike his brother, cannot hear the message that comes from afar, which could be a message of boredom or a message of hypermasculinity. Also, Yuniór and Rafa do not look alike: Rafa “was handsome and spoke out of the corner of his mouth” (*Drown* 6).

The narrative discourse sets Rafa up as the prototypical Dominican male; in fact, in the capital of Santo Domingo, Rafa “had his own friends, a bunch of tígueres who liked to knock down our neighbors and who scrawled *choca* and *toto* on walls and curbs” (*Drown* 5).<sup>6</sup> Based on these actions, *tígueres* exemplify Dominican heteronormativity, which is a type of hypermasculinity, and, importantly, their version of masculinity is accepted and even encouraged behavior for Dominican males. John Riofrio posits, “Definitions of what it means to be a “real

man,” are imposed externally while functioning as social constructs masked as fundamental truths, the nature order of things” (24). The social construct of Dominican masculinity based on the narrative discourse in “Ysrael” prioritizes hypersexualized, violent bodies that prey upon non-*tígueres*, especially women. In fact, Rafa says, “when I get home [back to Santo Domingo], I’m going to go crazy – chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else’s. I won’t stop dancing either. I’m going to be like those guys in the record books who dance four or five days straight” (4). Rafa’s *tíguere* masculinity demands the sexualized bodies of women both in the capital of Santo Domingo and in the *campo*. There, Rafa would “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. He’d done La Muda [A mute girl] that way for almost a month before her parents heard about it and barred her from leaving the house forever” (6). Rafa’s hypersexuality in these actions confirm his *tíguere* masculinity, which does not avoid preying upon marginalized bodies, including disabled bodies. In addition to La Muda, Rafa’s violence will also negatively affect Ysrael by the end of the short story.

The narrative discourse does not relate Yuniór as a *tíguere*; his masculinity in addition to his appearance differs from Rafa’s. According to Yuniór, Rafa was always insulting his appearance by commenting on Yuniór’s dark complexion, his Afro-Dominican hair, and the size of his lips. Rafa would say to his friends, “It’s the Haitian...Hey Señor Haitian, Mami found you on the border and only took you in because she felt sorry for you” (*Drown* 5). Although the Dominican Republic and Haiti share an island, the two countries, especially the Dominican Republic, tell their own narratives of national identity, particularly a narrative based on race and ethnicity. Stemming from the Trujillato, the Dominican Republic’s narrative of white supremacy based on its embrace of Hispanic ancestry and an erasure of African ancestry dominates its

national imaginary. That is, the narrative discourse in Rafa's quotation others Yuniór as an undesired, unsanctioned part of *dominicanidad*. In an interview alongside Edwidge Danticat, Díaz explains, "Anti-Haitianism is a racist ideology, whether it's practiced by France, the U.S., the Dominican Republic, or Haitian elites. So race is clearly at the core. It is a racism born of colonialism, whose foundational tenet is that people of color are not human" (Danticat and Díaz 32).

In fact, Yuniór suffers alienation from a national sense of belonging and identity throughout the narratives of Díaz. Later in the collection and many years later in narrative time, in "Edison, New Jersey," when a middle-aged Yuniór meets another Dominicana (or as he says Quisqueyana trying to prove his Dominicanness) she tells him that "You don't look it" (*Drown* 133). Yuniór's proclamations of his Dominicanness also resound with the protestations of Oscar de León in *Oscar Wao*. Oscar declares, "over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy" (49). Through Rafa's insults of Yuniór's Afro-Dominican appearance, the narrator criticizes the rigid understanding of phenotype in *dominicanidad* and exposes the social construction of race.

Next, the focalization, or narration, of Yuniór functions as an instrument to further explore race, ethnicity, and gender, especially masculinity. I argue, then, that discursive fluidity in "Ysrael" aligns Yuniór's character with Ysrael and that this discursive fluidity feminizes Yuniór's subjectivity. First, Yuniór as a narrator needs to be defined. Yuniór narrates several stories in *Drown*. His background, his history, and his ability as compared to Ysrael's disability, among others, determine everything that the story and the narrative discourse relate. The reader only understands Rafa through Yuniór's construction of Rafa; the reader only understands Ramón through Yuniór's reconstruction of photographs, rumors, and fictions. H. Porter Abbott

defines focalization as “the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative,” and he dismisses the more vague term of “point of view” because it does not capture the multiplicity of identity that focalization allows (73). For my discussion, focalization captures more than point of view and voice, which better suits the complex narratives of Yuniór.

Multiplicity thesis, as posited by Paula Moya, says that the “basic idea is that human identity is multiple—it is raced, gendered, sexed, and classed, all at once” (234). Since identity is multiple, the narrative discourse in “Ysrael” illustrates Yuniór’s race, gender, sex, and class simultaneously, especially as he interacts with his nemesis and double, Rafa and Ysrael, respectively. The story of “Ysrael,” despite its title, is not as much about Ysrael as it is about Yuniór. Thus, as Christopher González explains, “even stories about other characters that are narrated by Yuniór are in many ways about his development and maturation” (17). Díaz achieves this narrative dynamic through the strategic focalization of Yuniór and the construction of his identity as part of the narrative discourse. Moreover, every story in *Drown* tells two stories: the story of Yuniór and the story of Yuniór’s subject (González 34).

The focalization of Yuniór, then, aligns his identity with the sympathetic character of Ysrael, and this alignment or doubling of marginalized identities further explores the social constructs of ethnicity, gender, and class. The narrator hints at the doubling of Yuniór and Ysrael through the deviation of more standard forms of spelling, i.e., Junior and Israel. Yuniór is empathetic towards Ysrael, who wears a mask to cover his disfigured face. By focusing on Ysrael’s mask, the narration is calling attention to the metaphorical masks that both Yuniór and Rafa wear. Piri Thomas, the Afro-Caribbean, Nuyorican author of the autobiographical *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), places a mask, which he calls *cara palo*, or “wooden face,” on his protagonist. The *cara palo* in Thomas’ novel functions as a “hardened facade that presumes

mastery over the street” or “a fixed expressionless face. Wearing the mask imitates, even as it undermines, a stable sense of self” (Sandín 12-3, 101). Although Rafa’s mask of masculinity is more pronounced, Yuniór, too, wears a mask, even multiple masks.

During the bus ride in “Ysrael,” Yuniór experiences molestation that threatens his stable sense of self, or his mask of masculinity. On the bus, a man “with big teeth and a clean fedora” sexually molests Yuniór when he “spit in his fingers and started to rub at the stain [of a pastelito] but then he was pinching at the tip of my pinga through the fabric of my shorts” (*Drown* 12). Yuniór fights back and screams, “You low-down pinga-sucking pato” (*Drown* 12). Once off the bus, Yuniór begins to cry and Rafa says, “You...are a pussy” (*Drown* 13). Rafa thinks that Yuniór is crying because Rafa cheated the *cobrador*, or the fee collector on the bus, and made Yuniór participate in his crime. However, the feminization of Yuniór through the actions of the story threatens his masculinity, and his response, crying, only further feminizes him in the eyes of Rafa, a *tíguere*. Rafa continues, “Are you always going to be a pussy?...You have to get tougher. Crying all the time. Do you think our papi’s crying? Do you think that’s what he’s been doing the last six years [in the US]?” (*Drown* 14). Here, Rafa further propagates the fiction of hypermasculinity. Like Thomas’ *cara palo*, Yuniór’s invisible mask feigns a stable masculine identity while also undermining the hegemonic notions behind heteronormativity.

During the encounter with Ysrael, the narrative discourse shows the doubling of Yuniór and the former through their shared interest and circumstances: wrestling and absent fathers who immigrated to the US. At the moment when Yuniór and Ysrael share a genuine connection—when Yuniór notices that the mask twitch is really Ysrael smiling—Rafa destroys their mutual connection with a violent action by smashing a bottle over Ysrael’s head. The violence of Rafa shocks Yuniór who screams, “Holy fucking shit” (*Drown* 18). But the violence seems logical to

Rafa. Throughout the short story, the narrative discourse characterizes the *campo* as violent. Describing his daily existence with Rafa in the countryside, Yuniór says, “Tío Miguel had chores for us (mostly we chopped wood for the smokehouse and brought water up from the river) but we finished these as easy as we threw off our shirts, the rest of the day punching us in the face” (*Drown* 4). This violent rhetoric describes the boredom felt by the young boys but also a specter of violence that permeates rural living. Furthermore, Rafa often conflates this type of violence with sexuality, as seen in his exploitation of girls in the *campo*. Based on this hypersexual violence that Rafa misrecognizes as Dominican masculinity, smashing a bottle over Ysraél’s head seems natural to Rafa because he sees Ysraél as feminized. Yuniór, who has been feminized by his crying, makes a connection with another marginalized character whose disability makes him feminized, and Ysraél’s feminization makes him prey to Rafa’s violent hypermasculinity.

Anne Connor adds an allegorical reading: “Israel alludes to the country of the Israelites... With only this information, we can read the story “Ysraél” as an allegory of the suffering of an entire people due to their face, or racial or ethnic identity” (152-3). Because Ysraél is marginalized due to his disfigured face and his mask, Yuniór will also suffer due to his Afro-Dominican face in terms of belonging to a national Dominican identity. Finally, “Ysraél” marks race, ethnicity, and gender as socially constructed through the narrative fluidity in Yuniór’s identity where the tension-filled relationship between Rafa and Yuniór explores masculinity and racial and ethnic *dominicanidad*.

The second story in *Drown*, “Fiesta, 1980,” continues exploring identity through narrative fluidity; in this story, the narrator contends with the presence instead of the absence of Ramón, his identity—and thus Yuniór’s identity—and *dominicanidad* in diaspora. In the action

of the short story, the de las Casas family travels to New York City to attend a party for the arrival of Yuniór's aunt and uncle from the Dominican Republic. Before leaving for the party, the two brothers and Virta wait for Ramón to arrive. During their wait, Virta has fed Yuniór food, which he is not supposed to have before riding in Ramón's new van because he has a history of throwing up from motion sickness. And in fact, on their way to the Bronx for the party, Yuniór throws up in the van. At the party, the children watch television while the adults dance and drink. Rafa hides in a room with a young girl. Everyone eats except Yuniór until his aunt takes him on an errand outside of the apartment where she also gives him food that she sneaked out. Here, on the staircase, his aunt asks Yuniór "How's it going in the apartment? Are you kids OK?" (*Drown* 39). She is referring to Ramón's evident cheating. In the beginning of the short story while the family was waiting for Ramón, he was spending time with his Puerto Rican mistress, and when he arrived he immediately showered "to wash off the evidence quick" (*Drown* 23). During Yuniór's interrogation, he does not reveal anything. Yuniór explains, "Maybe it was family loyalty, maybe I just wanted to protect Mami or I was afraid that Papi would find out—it could have been anything really" (*Drown* 39). Yuniór identified with his mother more than his father, and he did not want to hurt her. Also, he lived in perpetual fear of physical abuse from Papi. However, his throw-away reason—it could have been anything really—holds more truth than he is aware of. Masculinity works in silences and absences, and Yuniór holds up the discourse of masculinity by not talking about another man's cheating. Finally, the party winds down, and the de las Casas family leaves after exchanging goodbyes. On the way back, Yuniór again vomits in Ramón's van.

As argued by González, each short story narrated by Yuniór develops his own identity as much as it develops the stories of his subjects. Two main differences mark the second story from

the first story in the collection: Ramón is present and the story takes place in New Jersey and New York. Now, instead of negotiating Rafa's hypermasculinity, Yuniór witnesses his father perform a new level of hypermasculinity. Even Rafa, who smashed a glass bottle over an innocent boy's head in order to see his disfigurement, plays a secondary role in the presence of Ramón. The focalization of Yuniór illustrates how violent Ramón is and how his infidelity to Virta, Yuniór's mom, destroys Ramón's presence in the lives of his family. Yuniór, who is not yet an active *tíguere* in "Fiesta, 1980," witnesses Ramón's infidelity and shifts the narrative discourse of infidelity through time, especially through analepses. These time shifts align the past with the immediate present of the party.

Throughout the short story, Ramón is a domineering presence, and he showcases his domination through violence. Yuniór does not enjoy a genial relationship with his father, explaining that, "I was the one who was always in trouble with my dad. It was like my God-given duty to piss him off, to do everything the way he hated" (*Drown* 26-7). When Yuniór did anger Ramón, his father would physically harm him, and Yuniór adds that "he was old-fashioned; he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whupped. You couldn't look him in the eye either—that wasn't allowed" (*Drown* 26). In the US, Ramón is Yuniór's nemesis. Yuniór says, "Earlier that year I'd written an essay in school called 'My Father the Torturer,' but the teacher made me write a new one. She thought I was kidding" (30). Perhaps, Yuniór is more accurate than even he may know because, as the reader finds out in "Aguantando," Ramón was part of Trujillo's National Guard, the police for an oppressive regime.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to his physical violence, Ramón enacts an emotional violence on his family, especially Virta, his wife, through his infidelity. His unfaithfulness far overshadows Rafa's

womanizing in the Dominican Republic. In one sense, this story like “Ysrael” is also about absence, and even though Ramón and Yúnior live in the same apartment, Ramón is always working or out committing adultery. At the beginning of “Fiesta, 1980,” Ramón just came back from visiting his Puerto Rican mistress, and at the end of the story in the second to last paragraph, Yúnior recounts when his mother questions him indirectly about Ramón. In the last paragraph, Yúnior vomits again in Ramón’s lime-green Volkswagen van, which he has been doing throughout the short story as he rides in Ramón’s van. Danny Mendez asserts that Yúnior’s vomiting is related to his displacement; he explains, “to be sick of motion itself is, on the unconscious level, to be sick of displacement itself” (131). Mendez explains Yúnior’s vomiting as a diasporic sickness. In another possible explanation, “Yúnior is not only vomiting as a result of rebelling against his father’s rules, but in a sense the verbal protest that he has repressed within him has come out of his mouth anyway” (Mendez 129). Here, Mendez postulates that in addition to his diasporic sickness, Yúnior vomits to rebel against his father’s violent and destructive hypermasculinity. In other words, Yúnior vomits as a response to the toxic relationship that his father has with his family, especially his wife.

The narrative time shifts in the short story hint at this reading because the narration brings instances or hints of Ramón’s infidelity in close proximity to the moments of Yúnior’s vomiting. This alignment in narrative discourse contributes to an unsettling of Yúnior’s masculinity: his father’s cheating makes him physically ill. He cannot at the moment in “Fiesta, 1980” perpetuate the models of masculinity performed by Rafa and Ramón. Nevertheless, in “Fiesta, 1980,” Yúnior’s induced vomiting in a moving van suggests that Yúnior would describe Ramón’s infidelity as deviant behavior while at once recognizing that unfaithfulness is a normative mode for Ramón. In one scene when the two brothers are eating dinner at the Puerto

Rican woman's house, Yunior says, "The affair was like a hole in our living room floor, one we'd gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there" (*Drown* 40). Ramón's masculinity works through the silence of both Rafa and Yunior, and Ramón's infidelity becomes normalized through Yunior's narration. These socially constructed models of masculinity as exposed by the narrative fluidity in "Fiesta, 1980" have travelled across the Caribbean with the Dominican diaspora into the US.

### **"How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie"**

The first two short stories of *Drown* filled in aspects of Yunior's subjectivity through his interactions with Ysrael, Rafa, and Ramón, and the discursive fluidity of "Ysrael" and "Fiesta, 1980" showed Yunior's racialized and gendered identity that is both multiple and fluid. In "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie," ("How to Date") discursive fluidity suggests a fluidity of gender performance and focalization that outlines the social constructs around race, class, and gender in *dominicanidad*. Also, this story points to a coloniality of power, or a colonial mindset, as the driving force behind Yunior's narrative discourse. The narration in "How to Date" increases in distance and person, i.e., second-person focalization. The use of second person foregrounds the narrator, Yunior. Thus, Yunior, who is instructing "you" in second-person focalization, in fact narrates to himself because he is both the narrator and the listener.

The title of this short story gives instructions to the reader; the story consists of an early adolescent Yunior, unconsciously, explaining the intersections between race, class, and gender in the dating scene of New Jersey in the 1980s. The narrator, Yunior, who is speaking in second-person pronouns tells the reader to hide the government cheese, hide the photographs of you in the *campo*, hide the photographs of your afro, hide the "basket with all the crapped-on toilet

paper under the sink” (*Drown* 144). The narrator is trying to erase these markers of class and race that mark him as low-class and Afro-Dominican. Although Yunior follows these directions to erase his lower socio-economic markers for any woman, his directions for dating Hispanic, African-American, Anglo-American, and mixed women differ. One could argue that Judith Butler’s discursive performativity applies, but I would argue that a coloniality of power, or a colonial mindset, pervades his interactions and predicates his machinations to try to get these women to have sex with him.<sup>8</sup>

The colonial mindset that Yunior internalizes in “How to Date” comes from a coloniality of power that promotes white supremacy and the control of gender as well as controlling hierarchal epistemologies of power. The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano articulates the coloniality of power as it relates to Latin America. Quijano examined the model of power in the New World and discovered that the hegemonic notions of race, ethnicity, and gender presupposed an aspect of coloniality (Quijano 533). That is, the colonizers of the New World set up racialized hegemonic systems to exploit the native populations in labor and resources; moreover, these hegemonic systems normalized a patriarchal structure of power to control gender. Writing in the twenty-first century, Quijano, also, encompassed the modern, globalized world in this system of a coloniality of power where the hegemonic notions revolve around capitalistic Eurocentrism. Notwithstanding, Quijano’s explanation of race in the colonial mindset speaks most to Yunior’s understanding of desirable women in “How to Date.” Speaking about race, Quijano relates that “The idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America” (534). Before the arrival of Spanish colonizers, the Taínos of Quisqueya did not classify themselves according to color because they did not have a concept of the modern social classification of race. Only after their conquest were the Taínos

relegated to the lowest level of society because they were black bodies that the white bodies of the colonizers deemed inferior. Further, Quijano argues, “In this way, race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power” (535). It is this colonial mindset of racial classification related to power that Yuniór negotiates in “How to Date.”

The racialized differentiations between the women in the narrator’s mind are tantamount; the narrative discourse highlights the narrator’s obsession with race, and most importantly, the right type of race. Yuniór says, “Run a hand through your hair like the white boys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa. She will look good. The white ones are the ones you want the most, aren’t they” (*Drown* 145). Yuniór’s admittance that he most desires Anglo-American women stems from his acceptance of a racialized coloniality while simultaneously denigrating the African ancestry of his Afro-Dominican subjectivity. Speaking to this idea of white supremacy, Daniel Bautista says that Dominicans show “a clear preference for whiteness” (85-86). This preference for whiteness and racism toward dark-skinned Dominicans appears first in “Ysrael” and even continues into Díaz’s other works, *Oscar Wao* and *This Is How*.

Another example of how race dominates Yuniór’s understanding of class and gender is when Yuniór must choose an eating venue for his dates. When he is at dinner with a ‘halfie’ at Wendy’s she, who is never named, says that black people treat her poorly; Yuniór thinks, “You’ll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don’t ask” (*Drown* 147). As an Afro-Dominican, Yuniór aligns himself and other dark-skinned Dominicans with African-Americans in the diaspora. In Yuniór’s mind, the mixed young woman also elides dark-skinned Dominicans with African-Americans, and so he decides not to ask. Both instances point to a colonial mindset

bent on hating dark skin. African-Americans treat the mixed young woman poorly because they despise the half of her that is white. Moreover, Yuni6r thinks that she also participates in this colonial white supremacy and would identify Yuni6r as black, or undesirable and potentially destructive.

In a different episode within the short story, Yuni6r is sitting next to an Anglo-American girl. While they are watching television, he says:

A whitegirl might just give it up right then. Don't stop her. She'll take her gum out of her mouth, stick it to the plastic sofa covers and then will move close to you. You have nice eyes, she might say. Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own. (*Drown* 147)

In his interactions with a 'whitegirl,' Yuni6r again privileges whiteness as desirable and, also, marks 'whitegirls' as hypersexual. Later in his narration, he comments that a 'brown girl,' 'blackgirl,' or 'halfie,' will not 'give it up,' as easily as a 'whitegirl.' These comments underscore Yuni6r's understanding of feminine sexuality when he characterizes 'whitegirls' as hypersexual and 'brown girls,' 'blackgirls,' and 'halfies,' as sexually conservative. These false categories of sexuality based on cultural perceptions points to another socially constructed paradigm that Yuni6r subscribes to. Either way, Yuni6r's goal is to have sex with these women because the understanding of his own gender is that of a budding *tiguere* who is compelled to sleep with as many women as possible.

In the end, however, Yuni6r recognizes that his manual most likely will not work and that his narration is as much for the "you" in the short story as it is for him. Despite all of his ploys and tricks, Yuni6r concedes, "But usually it won't work this way. Be prepared" (*Drown* 148). This internal sentiment suggests that the second-person focalization narrates a dating manual for a general "you" as well as for Yuni6r. In fact, the last line tells the listener to put the "government cheese back in its place before your moms kills you" (*Drown* 149). Clearly, the

second-person focalization, as Christopher González argued earlier, usually indicates that the narrator is also the narratee. Thus, the explication of racial, ethnic, and sexual categorizing according to the coloniality of power is meant for the reader and for Yuniór. In other words, the audience for “How to Date” is the reader and Yuniór, even though he narrates the short story. Because Yuniór narrates a manual on how to date—have sex with—women who differ according to his understandings of race, which encompass class and gender in Yuniór’s eyes, his second-person focalization demarcates the social constructions behind Yuniór’s actions and thoughts that are predicated on his acceptance of white supremacy and the colonial mindset.

### **“Aguantando” and “Drown”**

“Ysrael” and “Fiesta, 1980” couple well together because they develop Yuniór’s identity from his focalization. In a similar way, the fourth and fifth stories work as a unit in *Drown* since “Aguantando” foreshadows the fluidity of identity in “Drown.” The fluidity of identity seen in “Drown” derives from a discursive fluidity of space and time that highlights an ambivalence in absence and presence.

The fourth short story, “Aguantando,” which means ‘holding on, or persevering,’ is set in the Dominican Republic and concerns Virta’s and her children’s abandonment by Ramón who immigrated to the US as an economic refugee. In the story, Ramón sends a letter to Virta promising his return, which turns out to be a lie. Ylce Irizarry points out the Spanish word, *agua*, in the title which foreshadows not only the incoming hurricane at the end of the story in “Aguantando” but also the fluidity of geography, mobility, time, and identity in the following story, “Drown” (94). “Aguantando” begins, “I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed” (*Drown* 69). Like the North

American items that remind Yuniór of his father in “Ysrael,” such as Ysrael’s sandals, clothes, and kite, these photographs foreground Ramón’s presence in his absence. Melissa Birkhofer adds that the photograph is a “seeming contradiction, the photograph being both a presence and an absence, presence as a person regards it but absence because the photograph is of the past” (45). The fluidity between presence and absence, as the use of the photograph shows, claims a powerful influence on the imaginary of Yuniór and his brother, Rafa. *In absentia*, Ramón’s presence is always felt, and when he is physically present, his absence is never more pronounced.

Because Ramón is not present in the lives of Yuniór and Rafa, the two brothers must construct their own versions of masculinity based on the photographs and other men around them. Describing one photograph of Ramón, the narrator says, “he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he’d left behind. He was pieces of my friends’ fathers, of the domino players on the corner, pieces of Mami and Abuelo” (*Drown* 70). Within the faces of the men around them, they see Ramón’s face—a rough, macho soldier of Trujillo, part of the National Guard, with a shaved head who smokes cigars on duty. As the reader discovers later in the final story of the collection, “Negocios,” while on patrol Ramón breaks up a fight on the street Los Millonitos and begins an affair with a woman on that street before he leaves for the US. This is the father that Rafa and Yuniór idolize and eventually emulate, Rafa before Yuniór.

Given the absence of Ramón and his promises of a return, the narrative discourse of Yuniór’s narration, also, emphasizes a fluidity between memory and hope. The narrative discourse subtly implicates US imperialism in the abandonment of the de las Casas family by Ramón. The picture was taken days before the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic by L.B. Johnson who was concerned about the fallout of the Trujillo assassination. During the invasion,

Yunior's mother, Virta suffered an injury from a rocket attack. In a description of Virta, the narrator says:

She was a tiny woman and in the water closet she looked even smaller, her skin dark and her hair surprisingly straight and across her stomach and back the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965. None of the scars showed when she wore clothes, though if you embraced her you'd feel them hard under your wrist, against the soft part of your palm. (*Drown* 72)

The manifestation of US imperialism on the bodies of colonized subjects functions as a memory and an artifact of a destructive relationship between the global south of the Dominican Republic and the global north of the US. Abuelo, Yunior's grandfather, also comments on the imperialism of the US; the narrator says that his Abuelo would "talk about the good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca, when the United States wasn't something folks planned on" (*Drown* 72-3). Here, Abuelo comments on the flow of immigration from the global south into the global north due to the disparity between globalized economies in the new neoliberal reality of the late twentieth century. Since Ramón left for the US in order to bring his family to the States, he became an economic refugee and a victim of the globalized market. But his abandoned family also succumbs to victimhood, and their memories are always tied to the hope that he will return and return with wealth. In the final section of "Aguantando," Yunior fantasizes about the day his father returns to his family. The narrator says, "He'd have gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes. The whole barrio would come out to greet him" (*Drown* 87). Yunior projects material success on his triumphantly returning father. Yunior, even, projects kindness on his father when Yunior narrates:

He'd kiss Mami and Rafa and shake Abuelo's reluctant hand and then he'd see me behind everyone else. What's wrong with that one? he'd ask and Mami would say, He doesn't know you. Squatting down so that his pale yellow dress socks showed, he'd trace the scars on my arms and on my head. Yunior, he'd finally say, his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek. (*Drown* 88)

The hopes and fantasy of Yuniór become absurd and heart-wrenching when tied to the real memories of his father—a *tíguere* and part of Trujillo's La Guardia, who started cheating on his wife before he abandoned his entire family to live in the US. When Ramón finally returns, as narrated in "Invierno," in *This Is How You Lose Her*, Yuniór is using the bathroom in the bushes and is reprimanded by his father. Yuniór narrates, "In Santo Domingo, I'd pissed everywhere, and the first time Papi had seen me in action, whizzing on a street corner, on the night of his triumphant return, he had screamed, What in carajo are you doing?" (Drown 126). Also, the kindness expressed in the circling of his thumb on Yuniór's cheek in his hopes transforms into the reality of perpetual physical violence by Ramón on Yuniór as seen in "Fiesta, 1980." By the end of the short story, the fluidity between memory and hope shows Ramón to be an abusive, destructive cheater who abandoned his family, and the fluidity between absence and presence shows the damaging effects that Ramón has on Yuniór's developing subjectivity and on his sense of manhood.

In the fifth story of the collection, "Drown," the discourse of fluidity, especially in time shifts, examines a queering of Yuniór's sexuality that threatens his idealized masculinity. That is, "Drown" relates homosexual experiences between Yuniór and Beto, his friend, and these experiences expose Yuniór to an alternative, queer *dominicanidad*. As the title story, "Drown" holds a pivotal position in the collection. It marks the midpoint between "Ysrael" and "Negocios," the first and last short stories and conveys another example of discursive fluidity that relates to a fluidity in Yuniór's identity. Díaz achieves this narrative fluidity through water imagery, shifts in spatiotemporal time, and focalization ambiguity, or the identity of the narrator.

Beginning in the preceding story, "Aguantando," water imagery permeates the focalization of Yuniór. It had been raining all day when the messenger on a motorcycle arrives in

front of their house to deliver Ramón's letter promising his return. Yuniór is playing with his friend, Wilfredo, and they race boats along the gutters. Yuniór says, "No cars were parked on our side, except for a drowned Monarch and there was plenty of room between its tires and the curb for us to navigate through" (*Drown* 78). The poetic narration of a flooded car, perhaps, points to a significant moment in the following story, "Drown," where Yuniór becomes the drowned Monarch, or drowned *mariposa*, which is a coded term for a homosexual. The heavy rain foreshadows a hurricane in the short story, "Aguantando." The day after the hurricane, the de las Casas family, including Yuniór, Rafa, Virta, and Abuelo, go to the movies and visit the Malecón, which is the sea wall in Santo Domingo. Here, the focalization of Yuniór links the sea with a threatening destruction. As the hurricane passed the capital on the day before their day off, news spread that the waves had swept children out to sea, and "Abuelo shook his head when he heard the news. You'd think the sea would be sick of us by now, he said" (*Drown* 85). Abuelo's comments are a reference to the literal death that many poor Dominicans face who migrate by boat in order to reach the global north.

The focalization of Yuniór comments on a metaphorical death or destruction relating to the sea and water when Virta is talking about the place on the Malecón where she first met her husband, Ramón. Yuniór narrates, "I held on to the rail. Here? Oh no, she said. She turned around and looked out over the traffic. That part of the city isn't here anymore" (*Drown* 87). Virta's response indicates the metaphorical death of a site of memory that was washed away by the sea. Virta experiences a nervous breakdown when she received the letter from Ramón promising his return because she received another letter just like it before. Her response to Yuniór indicates that she has given up on the idea of reuniting with Ramón because the destructive nature of time like the sea can destroy even the strongest fortitudes.

The link between destruction and water in “Aguantando” foreshadows the possible destruction of heteronormativity in the subjectivity of the narrator of “Drown.” Yunior, as the narrator, moves back and forth in space and time to tell the story of his once friend, Beto. In these spatiotemporal shifts, the discourse of fluidity highlights the fluidity of identity in Yunior, especially a queering of his sexuality. In the action of “Drown,” Yunior talks about his close friendship with Beto two years ago and the difference of the present. Yunior stayed in the neighborhood after high school, and Beto left for college. In the first sentences of “Drown,” Yunior’s mom tells him that Beto has come back to visit, and Yunior pretends not to hear. But once she is asleep, he goes out to look for him at the public pool where before they spent many nights swimming after hours. In fact, the public pool after hours during their friendship was teeming with locals. Yunior says, “We were never alone, every kid with legs was there. We lunged from the boards and swam out of the deep end, wrestling and farting around” (*Drown* 92). The public pool is significant to Yunior because it is one of the first places that he checks to find Beto. According to Ylce Irizarry, the water, or more specifically, the pool in “Drown” becomes both empowering and threatening (158). The pool becomes both empowering and threatening because the narrator shares this communal space with Beto, a former friend of the narrator who has become a ‘pato,’ or a homosexual, according to Yunior. The narrator says, “He’s a pato now but two years ago we were friends” (*Drown* 91). The focalization primes the climax of the title short story by underscoring the dialectal relationship between Beto and the narrator. Beto is in college and a mobile character; the narrator stayed in the neighborhood and is afraid of mobility. Also, Beto is the active participant in a homosexual experience with the narrator while the narrator is the passive recipient.

The theme of mobility marks both characters' identities in interesting ways. Beto is away at college, while the narrator stays in a cycle of poverty and drug dealing and lives with his mother. While the narrator only ventured throughout his neighborhood, Beto was out "visiting other neighborhoods. He knew a lot of folks I didn't," and in flashback the narrator says that Beto told him, "You need to learn how to walk the world... There's a lot out there" (*Drown* 102). Beto is a man of the world with varied experiences; the narrator deals to the same people and does the same things. Irizarry says, "The liminality of emigration leaves Díaz's characters always on the threshold of the immigrant wave: sometimes floating, sometimes treading, sometimes drowning..." (151). The liminality that Irizarry refers to is between transculturation and assimilation. Here, Beto, as an assimilated young man, is floating, while Yuniors, who resists assimilation, is drowning in circularity and ignorance. As an immigrant, the ideal path for the narrator is the path that Beto is taking—that is, to become educated and become an assimilated citizen in the US. Beto's path is one way that the narrator can follow, and the narration also shows another path in the army recruiter who stalks the neighborhoods brandishing a weapon and dreams of upward mobility.

The narration in "Drown" characteristically plays with sequential ordering in telling the story that emphasizes how the past, present, and future are always present for the narrator because the paragraphs move seamlessly through time and space. These differences in spatiotemporal arrangement are called anachronies (Bal 83). Díaz uses these anachronies to highlight the fluidity of the narrator's identity. Usually the narrator juxtaposes actions of the past in a prolepsis to characterize the present-time actions. In "Drown," the most significant narrative discourse happens in the prolepses where the narrator builds the relationship between Beto and him and the eventual estrangement by the time Beto leaves for college. In building their

relationship, the narration reveals how close the two friends become because they skip school together, shoplift from the mall together, and swim at the public pool together. The focalization shows the deep bonds that they develop for each other.

When they get caught shoplifting, they are hiding under a car in the parking lot; the ‘rent-a-cop’ says, “You little shits better come out here real slow, I started to cry. Beto didn’t say a word, his face stretched out and gray, his hand squeezing mine, the bones in our fingers pressing together” (*Drown* 99). In a moment of crisis, the two boys physically comfort one another, which suggests that they find strength in their relationship. Also, this intimate moment hints at a thread of love between Yunior and Beto. The intimacy between the two boys becomes sexual when they watch a pornographic film at Beto’s house. In the paragraph before their homosexual encounter, Yunior goes by a ‘fag bar’ with his ‘boys’ and terrorizes the men at the bar with a plastic pistol. Then, the narrator begins a flashback by saying, “Twice. That’s it. The first time was at the end of that summer. We had just come back from the pool...” (*Drown* 103). The flashback is from two years ago, and it is preceded by a homophobic vignette in Yunior’s present. Similar to the sequential ordering done in “Fiesta, 1980,” the shifts in time between paragraphs in “Drown” bring together instances of homophobic violence and homosexual encounters. This sequential ordering points to a fluidity in Yunior’s identity. The flashback between Beto and Yunior relates a significant change in his identity as a Dominican male who has been taught by the *tíguerismo* of his brother and father. Thus, Beto, a mobile, queer Dominican subject, offers Yunior an alternative model of *dominicanidad*. Yunior, however, rejects the path shown to him by Beto, and, in fact, the experience reifies Yunior’s sense of masculinity as heteronormative.

At the end of the short story, the narration reads, “You can’t be anywhere forever, was what Beto used to say, what he said to me the day I went to see him off. He handed me a gift, a

book, and after he was gone I threw it away, didn't even bother to open it and read what he'd written" (*Drown* 107). Yunior throws away his guidebook to getting out of the neighborhood. The threat of Beto's homosexuality to Yunior's construction of Dominican masculinity is too much for him, and he would rather remain immobilized by poverty and addiction than depart from his concept of normative masculinity as shown to him by his brother and father. In the end, Yunior rejects an alternative *dominicanidad*, but the discourse of fluidity suggests that the rigid, socially constructed version of masculinity that Yunior clings to only keeps him trapped in a reified performance of traditional gender norms.

### **Conclusion**

As a *bildungsroman*, *Drown* reconstructs the developing subjectivity of Yunior through discursive fluidity that illustrates the social constructions behind hegemonic notions of race, class, and gender in *dominicanidad*. "Ysrael" and "Fiesta, 1980" both examine the beginnings of Yunior's development as a son and brother of a *tíguere*. "How to Date" shows an adolescent Yunior's fluid gender performances of heteronormativity tied to race, class, and ethnicity based on a colonial mindset. In "Aguantando," the narrator highlights a fluidity in absence and presence and how colonial memories interact with postcolonial hopes. "Drown" relates the queering of Yunior's sexuality and tells the story of a destroyed friendship between Yunior and Beto.

Yunior's identity development continues in *Oscar Wao* and *This Is How You Lose Her*. In the novel, Yunior's identity remains more static than in *Drown* because he becomes the "typical" Dominican male, a *tíguere* (Patteson 8). Then, in *This Is How*, Yunior's identity changed significantly when he begins to decolonize his mind and his heart. That is, he reorganizes his sense of self and love according the rules of a shared humanity regardless of sex

and not according to a coloniality of power. In the next chapter, I extend the discussion of hegemonic masculinity in a Dominican context through a reading of *Oscar Wao* that links heteronormativity to Trujillo. Then, I further the discussion of coloniality of power by shifting the focus from race to gender. Finally, in the third chapter, I link the narrative structure of “Negocios” to “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” to explore how Yuniór decolonizes his sense of self.

## Ch. 2: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Interlude, Intertext

Between his two short story collections, *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, Díaz published his first and only novel to date, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Readers of his fiction again read this narrative through his literary alter-ego, Yunior de las Casas. The narrator constructs a multigenerational, transnational family saga concerning the Cabral and de León families as they wage a cosmic war against *fukú americanus*, “or more colloquially *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (*Oscar Wao* 1). Oscar de León, Yunior’s subject, for most of the novel’s narrative timeline does not fit the model of Dominican heteronormativity as defined in *Drown*: he is overweight, unattractive, a writer of sci-fi and fantasy, and unpopular (a dramatic understatement) with women. In Díaz’s characteristic use of narrative space-time, the action in the novel fluidly shifts back and forth through time and across seas from the Dominican Republic to the US, particularly to Patterson, New Jersey. Divided into three sections with several authorial (Yunior) interruptions that interpolate small scenes or explanations about a character or a key idea behind the narration, *Oscar Wao* focuses on the lives of the de León family as they live and negotiate New Jersey and the global north. An integral aspect of the narrative discourse, however, does not appear in the story, or actions of Yunior’s subjects; this part of the narrative discourse appears in the footnotes below the main text where Yunior introduces the Galactus-like figure of Rafael Trujillo:<sup>9</sup>

Trujillo, one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. (*Oscar Wao* 2 fn. 1)

Historians named the period from 1930 until 1961—the year that Trujillo was assassinated—the Trujillato, which lasted over thirty years and left an indelible mark on the Dominican imaginary on everything from politics to masculinity. Maja Horn argues that “today’s hegemonic notions of masculinity were consolidated during the dictatorship of Rafael Leónides Trujillo (1930-1961) and thus are in many ways a distinctly modern formation” (1). Horn’s argument plays out in the narration when Yunior characterizes the Trujillato as the “first modern kleptocracy” and the “world’s first culocracy,” (*Oscar Wao* 2 fn. 1, 217). Yunior criticizes Trujillo’s regime for stealing the wealth of the nation and accumulating it at the top and, also, for perpetuating a terrifying rape culture throughout Dominican society that continues into the narrativized diaspora in *Oscar Wao* and, most importantly, outside of Yunior’s storyworld.

However, even though Yunior disparages the Trujillato, Yunior’s narration makes him the author of a reconstructed history, and this gives him *authority*. Jason Cortés says that “the narrator is but another mask for the Dominican dictator, Rafael Leónides Trujillo, thus establishing complicity—albeit problematically—between the authorial function and authoritarian power” (4). I agree that Yunior, through his focalization, controls the narrative and the fact that he is narrating a story about a dictator controlling an entire country makes the comparison immediate; however, through the narration, Yunior also grants more and more legitimacy and authority to his subjects, including Oscar and Lola. And in a similar style of narration as seen in *Drown*, narrating his subjects gives Yunior a better understanding of self. Thus, I argue that the focalization of Yunior highlights the contestation of narratives between metanarratives and individual, marginalized voices. Also, Yunior’s focalization posits narrative truths inherent in the telling of *Oscar Wao*, such as the multiplicity of *fukú* and revelatory *zafas*.

Moreover, I argue Yuniór bridges the spaces between all three works of fiction by Díaz through intertextualities and an intertextual tripling. I, also, argue that Yuniór's subversive narration is only made possible by the modified form of the novel—a novel that takes up the voices of many genres, languages, registers, and narratives structures—employed by Díaz to make *Oscar Wao* a compelling political work of resistance against hegemonic notions of masculinity, ethnicity, and race.

### **Yuniór's Construction of a 'Novel' Genre**

One of the most striking aspects of Yuniór's narration in the novel is his inclusion of speculative fiction—interests that are typically excluded from the hegemonic notion of male *dominicanidad* that the novel sets forth. In fact, a Dominican male interested in such genres in the streets of New Jersey “suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L” (*Oscar Wao* 17). But rather than narrating his own love of speculative fiction, he obsessively talks about Oscar's own obsession with genres, especially *The Lord of the Rings* and *Akira*.

Yuniór, first, started introducing speculative fiction in “No Face” in the collection, *Drown*, where Ysrael, the boy from the first story in *Drown*, has adopted a superhero persona called No Face, originally shouted by a neighbor of Ysrael and meant as an insult. The short story, focalized through a distant third-person narrator, shows No Face navigating his hostile environment where violent boys threaten to make him a girl. But he also visits a comic book store weekly where he buys comics such as, “Kaliman, who takes no shit and wears a turban. If his face were covered he'd be perfect” (*Drown* 155). No Face adopts his masked persona and creates the fantasy of a superhero because the persona helps him navigate his storyworld as a marginalized character who is excluded from a hegemonic notion of *dominicanidad* normativity.

In *Oscar Wao*, the narrator prolifically writes speculative fiction into the narrative

discourse to better explain the storyworld of Oscar and Yuniór. In fact, Yuniór tells the reader that Oscar “was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (*Oscar Wao* 6). Oscar de León also adopts a persona in the same manner as Ysrael when he starts answering to Oscar Wao in order to navigate the sci-fi and fantasy in the Dominican diaspora. The name Oscar Wao, like No Face, started as an insult. Yuniór explains, “I couldn’t believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, *quién es Oscar Wao*” (*Oscar Wao* 180). While Oscar adopts this single mask, the reader realizes throughout the novel that Yuniór wears many masks, and one of the epigraphs that begins *Oscar Wao* exposes him as a lover of speculative fiction. The epigraph comes from a 1960’s comic book, *Fantastic Four*, by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby: ““Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to **Galactus**??”” (*Oscar Wao* i). The epigraph introduces the political function of Yuniór’s narration in telling the story about the de León *fukú*: he wants to relate the importance of these silenced lives and will tell their story in order to combat Galactus, a stand-in for Trujillo or *fukú*.

Yuniór’s most effective weapons against erasure by the influence and power of Galactus, or *fukú* specifically, is his narration and his referential interpolations—thirty-two footnotes. In addition to the hybridity of Spanglish and inter-dialectical registers, the footnotes mix historiography with apocalyptic fiction, a *bildungsroman*, a comic romance, and a family saga. Because Yuniór controls the narration, he controls the subversive narrative discourse in the footnotes. Juanita Heredia explains that Yuniór “not only gives the impression that he presents historical facts “objectively,” but he also critiques the abuse of authorial power in historical

discourse, often written by male officials in power at the expense of the marginalized in Dominican and U.S. societies (e.g., blacks, mulattos, the poor, women)” (210). These footnotes help undermine the hegemonic narratives of the Trujillato. That is, narrative, according to Antonio Gramsci, is “the main form of cultural production to embody normality and establish or maintain what Gramsci termed hegemony—that is, the absolute and unquestioned dominance of a particular view or group” (Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck 218). Thus, the footnotes help relegate, though, of course, not entirely, the dominant hegemonic notions of racial, ethnic, and gendered *dominicanidad* formed during the Trujillato to the margin, and this contestation of narratives makes the stories of the Cabral and the de León no longer brief, nameless footnotes in history. Their lives are the main story.

This space of footnotes in addition to diminishing the importance of the Trujillato, although not its effects, allows Yuniors to relate his critical views of the Dominican Republic after the Trujillato. The story of the Cabral-de León *fukú* begins with the story of Abelard Cabral, Oscar’s grandfather, who refused to forfeit his daughter’s virginity to Trujillo for which he was tortured and killed. However, rather than beginning with Abelard, Yuniors contests, “There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me, I would have started when the Spaniards “discovered” the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?” (*Oscar Wao* 211 fn. 22). Yuniors stretches the beginning of *fukú* back to Columbus’ arrival on Hispaniola and to an imperialistic US foreign policy—in other words, colonialism. Yuniors is most concerned with the postcolonial reality of the Dominican Republic and in the Dominican diaspora. When Dominican Americans travel back to the island, the narrator says, “it’s one big party; one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless,

the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German, and Italian tourists love to rape—yes, sir, nothing like a Santo Domingo summer” (*Oscar Wao* 272). Yunió knowinglÝ criticizes the persistent coloniality of power that marginalizes Dominicans based on race and class and allows sexual assault by members of the Global North on the children of the Global South. Finally, inserting constant references to speculative fiction and other genres into the novel and inserting footnotes, the focalization of Yunió marks *Oscar Wao* as a subversive and genre-bending *zafa*, or counterspell.

### **Silences and Zafas**

Yunió’s rewriting of metanarratives in the footnotes and his blending of genres into the American novel serve to uncover postcolonial erasures. Specifically, the prerogatives behind Yunió’s narration recognize the silences, or *páginas en blanco*, around racism and masculinity and counter the *fukú* around these silences with *zafas*. Moreover, Yunió’s narrative counterspells expose the curse of coloniality, particularly the coloniality of race, gender, and sexuality. And so Yunió’s narration fills in these blank pages and *erases* these erasures. First, Yunió connects the idea of silences to the *página en blanco* then to the Trujillato. His footnote reads:

It was he who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora. Considered our national “genius,” Joaquín Balaguer was a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (*Oscar Wao* 90 fn. 9)

From the context of the footnote, the reader discerns that the truth espoused by the Trujillato is a construction. The narrator points to Balaguer in the death of Orlando Martínez. But as the author of the memoir, Balaguer has constructed a truth that differs from reality: he most likely killed Martínez. Using a *página en blanco*, Balaguer protests his innocence. The author of *Oscar Wao*,

then, commits a similar violence. The narrator, Yuniór, puts whatever he wants into his narrative and, also, leaves out whatever he wants. Thus, Yuniór's narrative construction has its own *páginas en blanco*. However, his constructions function as deconstructions of the silences and erasures around the brutality of the Trujillato and the continuing *páginas en blanco* surrounding racism and masculinity. As Jennifer Vargas explains, "The novel simultaneously foregrounds these absent presences and provides a narrative space in which repressed stories can be dictated and chronicled in the archive of fiction" (23). Yuniór as archivist and complier of the Cabral and de León family history exposes their silences to the reader and attempts a *zafa* on their behalf.

Silences and erasures affect all of the characters in *Oscar Wao*, including Beli, who is Oscar's mother, Oscar de León, and Yuniór. The silence that revolves around Beli is racist and sexual violence. Speaking on the legacy of violence in Hispaniola, Lucía Suárez asserts that "violence's greatest legacy is the dark lacuna it leaves us with" (9). Often, perceived propriety or uncomfortableness with a dark subject, such as rape or assault, muzzle important conversations within communities. The dark lacuna, or silences, surrounding sexual and racial violence propagates consent and perpetuates the structures that allow the violence in the first place. Suárez continues, "Diaspora literature, I insist, refuses to let the violence of the past be buried" (Suárez 11). Here, Diaspora literature, such as *Oscar Wao*, gives victims of violence a voice. Telling the stories of Beli and Oscar combats the historical and cultural lacuna of violence. Suárez links the idea of silenced violence to burials because Hispaniola has a long legacy of burying victims of racialized and sexual violence, such as the victims of the Haitian massacre in 1937.

In the section entitled "Poor Abelard 1944-1946," the narrator relates the story of Beli's first months and her eventual selling into servitude. Beli is the sole survivor of the Fall of the

Cabrals at the hands of the Trujillato, and when she was born “she was so dark no one on Abelard’s side of the family would take her” (*Oscar Wao* 252). The Cabral family relatives do not want a dark-skinned child, even though she is the daughter of the famous, wealthy Abelard Cabral. Then, after Beli barely survives her first few months as a premature, sickly child, distant relatives snatch her up and expect a reward for caring for her. When the reward never arrives, they give Beli to more distant relatives in the *campo*. The distant relatives only keep her for a short time. Then the mother of the *campo* family leaves the village with Beli but does not return with her, and the mother claims that she died. But the truth is that Beli is sold to another *campo* family in Azua as a child servant. The narrator explains, “(Before 1951, our orphaned girl had lived with another foster family, monstrous people if the rumors are to be believed, a dark period of her life neither she nor her madre ever referenced. Their very own *página en blanco*)” (*Oscar Wao* 78). When La Inca, Beli’s surrogate mother and actual aunt, finds Beli in the *campo* of Azua, she is living in a chicken coop. This silenced history, which not even the narrator can narrate, exposes the destructive force of racist violence upon the formation of a female Dominican subjectivity.

Despite being rescued by La Inca from the *campo*, Beli continues to experience racist violence throughout the novel, which almost costs her her life. In the section entitled, “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955-1962,” the reader learns about the hegemonic notions of white supremacy inherent in the Trujillato epistemology that directly affects Beli. Back in Baní, La Inca’s hometown, Beli lives in a “city famed for its resistance to blackness, and it was here, alas, that the darkest character in our story resided” (*Oscar Wao* 78). In her school, El Redentor, which is one of the best schools in Baní, Beli falls in love with Jack Pujols, her first heartbreak, who is the “school’s handsomest (read:whitest) boy” (*Oscar Wao* 89). At first, the blackness of

Beli makes her invisible to Jack Pujols; then, when Beli, seemingly overnight, blossoms into a woman with hyperbolic curves, Jack Pujols cannot overlook Beli any longer according to his male scripts of hypermasculinity. Eventually, Beli and Jack Pujols are discovered in a school closet, which effectively ends their relationship. Not only was Jack Pujols having sex with a poor scholarship-recipient but also a girl designated as Afro-Dominican, or unacceptable to the children of the Dominican elite. In an interview with Paula Moya, Díaz comments on the notions of white supremacy that condition this failed relationship and encounter between Jack Pujols and Beli when he says, ““White supremacy is the great silence of our world, and it is embedded in much of what ails us as a planet”” (Moya and Díaz 394). The white supremacist logic of Trujillato *dominicanidad* cannot allow miscegenation; Díaz, then, contends that this white supremacy epistemology persists into Yunior’s narration of *Oscar Wao* and even outside of the *Oscar Wao* storyworld.

In conjunction with Quijano’s idea of a coloniality of power that determines racial hierarchies, a coloniality of gender points to the reasons behind Beli’s near-death beating and rape. In a later part of the section titled, “The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955-1962,” Beli falls in love for the second time with a character known as the Gangster, a high-ranking member of Trujillo’s regime. The two abscond often during their short-lived relationship, and Beli thinks that she will marry the Gangster. But the Gangster is already married. Talking about the identity of the Gangster’s wife, Yunior says, “It’s true. The Gangster’s wife was—drumroll, please—*Trujillo’s fucking sister!*” (138). The Gangster’s wife confronts Beli and tells her that her henchmen will take her to a doctor to have an abortion. Initially, Beli escapes the henchmen by calling for help from the Palacio Peking crew, her co-workers at a Chinese restaurant.

Then, the henchmen come back, abduct her, and take her out to the cane fields where they “beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog” (*Oscar Wao* 147). Yuniór characterizes the henchmen’s view of Beli as intentionally lacking humanity; to these men, Beli is not a woman (a pregnant woman, too) or even human. Yuniór continues in his narration of Beli’s beating, “Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it’s not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope” (*Oscar Wao* 147). Yuniór narrates the horrific detail of a sexual assault on a severely beaten, pregnant dark-skinned woman left for dead in the cane fields. Maria Lugones’ exploration of the coloniality of gender foregrounds the causalities behind this shocking episode. Lugones’ work with Quijano’s coloniality of power seeks to undo the separation of identity categories such as race and gender. Her theory suggests that these categories are all at once in play. And so, Beli’s dark skin and her gender under the colonial mindset suppresses her humanity. Citing Oyéronké Oyewùmí, Maria Lugones, writes, ““The emergence of women as an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations, resulted, in part, from the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state. For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination”” (qtd. in Lugones 8). During the Trujillato, remnants of the colonial state persisted in the racial discrimination and female subordination as seen in Beli’s three heartbreaks. Thus, as a dark-skinned female, Beli is subjected to the colonial violence of dehumanization and to the physical and sexual violence of the Trujillato. As the narrator of *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór, who constructs the story of Beli’s beating and later Oscar’s beating and death, should connect the dots and find the threat of violent ideology related to both episodes, but he does not. In fact, Yuniór’s identity in the rest of *Oscar Wao* does not change significantly, and he himself wears the mask of Trujillo in his narration.

The second epigraph after the Galactus quotation amplifies these ideas through the poetry of Derek Walcott, the St. Lucia, Nobel-prize winning poet. The epigraph is the second stanza in Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*," which is about Shabine's journey and escape on a Schooner named "Flight" from the influences of imperialism and corruption on his native island in the Caribbean. The poem reads: "I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (*Oscar Wao* ii). Similar to the epigraph that began *Drown*, which elicited the hybridity of language, this epigraph concerns the in-between spaces of racial identity and ethnicity. The question like the question of Spanglish speakers is one of belonging. As a subject of English and Dutch imperialism who also has roots in the African diaspora, the speaker defiantly questions the rigid racial classifications of colonial systems that make him invisible—a nobody, a brief, nameless life. Díaz would instead agree that the speaker is a nation because racial and ethnic identities should not erase a subject's humanity.

Another silence investigated through Yunior's narration, consciously or unconsciously, is the página en blanco, or constructed truth, surrounding masculinity. Jason Cortés writes, "The virile discourse, so emblematic of the Trujillo Era, reverberates in the macho behavior that the narrator exhibits, making the reader wonder about the haunting legacies of Dominican hegemonic masculinity—and its practices in *tíguero*—in the development of a diasporic identity politics" (13). In Díaz's first work, *Drown*, Rafa and Ramón exemplify *tíguero*, and in *Oscar Wao*, Yunior becomes a *tíguero*, who cheats on several women, including Lola, Oscar's sister, according to the masculine legacies formed during the Trujillato. Oscar, however, is not a *tíguero*; his lack of *tíguero* functions as a form of exclusion. Yunior writes, "it wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all

aggressive and martial tendencies” (*Oscar Wao* 15). Oscar’s father, like Yuniór’s father, is absent during his development and is never named anywhere in the novel.

Nevertheless, Oscar tries to act on the hegemonic notions of masculinity by trying to have sex with Ybón Pimental, “a semiretired puta,” in the Dominican Republic because Yuniór tells him that “O, it’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (*Oscar Wao* 279, 174). However, Oscar falls prey to the same codes of masculinity that demand women because men are not supposed to sleep with other men’s *sucias*. The capitán, Ybón’s boyfriend, is a corrupt policeman in Santo Domingo, and, having known about Oscar for several months, the capitán happens to witness Oscar’s first kiss with Ybón when he pulls them over. The narrator then relates how Oscar is taken to a cane field and severely beaten as was his mother, Beli, decades before. The narrative discourse points to the silence of *fukú* after Oscar’s retrieval from the cane fields when Beli and La Inca do not talk about the parallel stories; the narrator says, “If they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it” (*Oscar Wao* 301). The silence between Beli and La Inca parallels the silence and erasure of male subjects who do not perform the hegemonic masculinity of *tíguerismo*.

However, like the silence surrounding Oscar’s masculinity as *fukú*, Yuniór’s masculinity also functions through silences. Yuniór participates in the post-Trujillo macho ethics of a *tíguere* but does not or cannot acknowledge the source of his hypermasculinity. He is filled with regret after he cheats on Lola. He says, “All my fault, of course. Couldn’t keep my rabo in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world” (*Oscar Wao* 311). Yuniór through his cheating performs a similar type of violence that the capitán performed when he had Oscar severely beaten: his version of masculinity is violent and destructive. Oscar de León tells Yuniór that Lola loves him and asks why he cheats on her. Yuniór replies, “If I knew that, it

wouldn't be a problem" (*Oscar Wao* 313). Then, Oscar says, "Maybe you should try to find out" (*Oscar Wao* 313). But Yuniór never finds out in the narration of *Oscar Wao*, and he does not realize that his cheating stems from a hegemonic notion of hypermasculinity forged during the Trujillato, and, in fact, the systems of racialized hypermasculinity that Trujillo enacts stem from patriarchal and gender norms established during the colonization of the Caribbean.

### **An Apocalyptic Tripling**

After establishing the postcolonial realities of silenced and marginalized bodies and voices of the de León and Cabral families, the narrator shifts his focus and considers his own postcolonial reality. The narrator, then, better understands his reality by creating a linked storyworld between the works of Díaz. Yuniór, thus, writes and underscores intertextualities that link *Drown* to *Oscar Wao*. The narrative in *Drown* doubles Yuniór and Ysraél while the narrator of *Oscar Wao* creates an apocalyptic tripling among Ysraél, Yuniór, and Oscar. *Drown* feminizes Yuniór and Ysraél in the narrative discourse by doubling them in the short story, "Ysraél," which develops Yuniór's identity as Rafa's younger brother and son of Ramón, the embodiments of *tíguerismo*. The way that Yuniór internalizes the violent and destructive modes of masculinity seen in *Drown* does not manifest itself until *Oscar Wao* where Yuniór has become a *tíguere*. However, the narrative discourse of Yuniór's very own focalization undermines the mask of *tíguerismo* that he pretends to live by.

First, *Oscar Wao* hints at commonalities between Yuniór and Oscar. It is Yuniór, himself, who says that he has "thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix" (*Oscar Wao* 285). From the first epigraph from *Fantastic Four*, Yuniór's focalization requires speculative fiction to understand his storyworld. In several instances, Yuniór calls himself our "humble Watcher," which is a reference to Jack Kirby's Uatu the Watcher (*Oscar Wao* 92). Using this appellation,

Yunior positions himself as not only the narrator but as a sympathetic narrator. On another occasion, when Yunior and Oscar room together at Rutgers, Yunior asks his readers, “Do you know what sign fool put up on our dorm door? *Speak, friend, and enter*. In fucking Elvish! (Please don’t ask me how I knew this. Please)” (*Oscar Wao* 171-2). Even though Yunior would never admit it, because his mask of hypermasculinity would not allow him, he wants to become the next Dominican Tolkien as much as Oscar does. From these instances and many others, the narration, again, doubles two seemingly disparate characters and exposes their similarities.

In addition to the doubling of Yunior and Oscar, the narrator creates a more unsettling tripling that manifests itself through an apocalypse. In the narrative discourse around the most violent moments portrayed in *Oscar Wao*, two unsettling images haunt the scenes: a man with no face or a man with a mask. Beli, Oscar, and Yunior, all, experience this specter because this figure symbolizes the silences, erasures, páginas en blanco surrounding the Trujillato and the after effects of the Trujillato. Beli sees the man with no face sitting in a rocking chair in a small pueblito on the way to the cane fields where she is nearly beaten to death. Similarly, Oscar sees the same man with no face sitting in a rocking chair in front of a ruined house as he is driven to the cane fields. Both Yunior and Oscar experience masked figures. Five years after Oscar’s death, Yunior has the following dream:

We’re in some kind of ruined bailey that’s filled to the rim with old dusty books. He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. ...It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (325)

Combining several key images and sentiments from both *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*, the implied author triples the characters of Yunior, Oscar, and Ysrael. Oscar de León has become Ysrael and

the páginas en blanco, while Yuniór becomes the *zafa* to Oscar's *fukú*; however, the instance also has the potential for continuing violence and silence embodied by the man with no face.

Yuniór's apocalyptic vision years after Oscar's death implies that Yuniór constantly thinks about Oscar, not as Oscar de León but as Oscar Wao, "a nerdy overweight, dark-skinned Afro-Latino fluent in the fantastic genres but illiterate in the game of sex" (Vargas 17). Oscar Wao's life and legacy in Yuniór's narration becomes a *zafa* to the Trujillato *fukú*, including hypermasculinity. And despite Yuniór's attempt at redemption in Oscar's memory, his telling cannot completely eradicate *fukú*. At its core, *fukú* is the 'Curse and Doom of the New World,' and through its passage in history *fukú* has acquired numerous synonyms, including the Admiral, Columbus, Trujillo, Balaguer, even erasure, and Dominican heteronormativity. Thus, *fukú* began as the arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean and has since morphed into larger, hegemonic notions, including normative race, ethnicity, and gender. The *fukú* as apocalypse, another permutation, haunts every major character in *Oscar Wao*; it haunts Oscar de León, Lola, Socorro Cabral, Abelard Cabral, Beli, La Inca, and especially Yuniór. The narrator repeatedly references the apocalypse. For Yuniór, the apocalypse is tied to Dominican heteronormativity. For other characters in *Oscar Wao*, the apocalypse is a more direct threat of violence.

When Abelard Cabral, Beli's grandfather who refused to hand over his daughter to be raped by Trujillo, is imprisoned, Yuniór narrates that for Socorro Cabral, his wife, "It was worse than she, in all her apocalyptic fervor, had imagined. It was the Fall" (*Oscar Wao* 242). Abelard eventually dies days before Trujillo's assassination after years of torture in prison, and the entire Cabral family, except the third and final daughter of Abelard and Socorro Cabral, succumb to untimely deaths under mysterious circumstances. The narrative continues:

What about the third and final daughter, Hypatia Belicia Cabral, who was only two months old when her mother died, who never met her father, who was held by her sisters

only a few times before they too disappeared, who spent no time inside Casa Hatüey, who was the literal Child of the Apocalypse?” (*Oscar Wao* 251)

Beli is the logical conclusion of *fukú* for subjects who do not fit within a normativity molded by the Trujillato. Beli, as a dark-skinned girl, and Oscar, as a ghetto nerd who is not a *tíguere*, do not belong in this version of *dominicanidad*, but they belong nowhere else. Christopher González characterizes Yuniór’s understanding of apocalypse in the following way: “The more he reveals by attempting to understand the past, the more he understands that apocalypse is a *constant* unfolding of world-ending events” (81). The world-ending event for Oscar and Abelard is a literal death; Yuniór’s world-ending events are the times that he cheats on his girlfriends and wears the mask of Trujillo—the hypermasculine *tíguere*.

Years after Oscar’s death, Yuniór charges Isis, the daughter of Lola, to finally end the curse of *fukú* for the de León family by giving her his archives of Oscar’s writings, which he stores in four refrigerators in his basement. And it seems that Yuniór has achieved a counterspell against his *fukú*. He says, “These days I live in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, teach composition and creative writing at Middlesex Community College, and even own a house at the top of Elm Street, not far from the steel mill...I have a wife I adore and who adores me, a negrita from Salcedo whom I do not deserve, and sometimes we even make vague noises about having children” (*Oscar Wao* 326). Yuniór appears to leave behind his *tíguerismo*; he is married to a dark-skinned Dominican woman and teaches at a community college. He continues, “These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (*Oscar Wao* 326). Ostensibly, Yuniór is talking about his new writing habits that he learned from Oscar, but the narrative discourse reveals that he is talking about Oscar’s unique Dominican subjectivity as a man who did not wear the mask of Trujillo. Yuniór claims that he is a new man, but despite his best attempts curing his *fukú*, he has

failed. In the first short story of the subsequent collection, Yuniór is recounting another time that he has cheated. Thus, the narrator creates an apocalyptic tripling in order to reveal that the specter of Trujillo and hegemonic notions of normative race, ethnicity, and masculinity continue to haunt Dominicans on the island and in the diaspora.

## Conclusion

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* functions from a narratological perspective as an interlude between the two short story collections by continuing the narrative of Yuniór de las Casas who becomes a vital storyteller in explicating the lives of the de León and Cabral family histories during and after Trujillo. Beginning with the epigraphs written by Lee and Kirby and Derek Walcott, the genre of *Oscar Wao* blends nontraditional registers into a story of subversion and resistance to a hegemony of masculinity and *dominicanidad* based on the Trujillato. One form of *fukú* that the novel tries to dispel is the silences and erasures around racist and ethnocentric logics of white supremacy. Also, Beli's story explores the coloniality of gender and sexuality, which is another type of *fukú*. In addition to inserting footnotes and speculative fiction into his narrative discourse to dispel *fukú*, Yuniór tackles *tíguerismo* as shown by the capitán, Trujillo, and Yuniór himself. Finally, the implied author creates an apocalyptic tripling between Ysrael, Oscar de León, and Yuniór in order to further illuminate the hyper masculine legacies of the Trujillato.

The interlude of *Oscar Wao* as a narrative links with overarching themes in *Drown*, such as identity hermeneutics and familial dynamics. Also, *Oscar Wao* sets up the action and narrative contestations found in *This Is How*, which primarily concerns Yuniór's negotiation of hegemonic masculinity underscored in *Oscar Wao* in the Dominican diaspora in the US. Similar to the narrative ending of *Drown* in "Negocios," the end of *Oscar Wao* plays right into the action of

*This Is How* where Yuniór travels to the Dominican Republic on vacation with his girlfriend, Magda, in an attempt to reconcile their relationship after he has cheated on her. Also, the narrator links the storyworlds of all three works of fiction by Díaz through compelling intertextualities that more directly link Yuniór's narratives with Ramón's in *This Is How*'s final story, "The Cheater's Guide to Love."

### Ch. 3: Towards a Decolonial Love in *This Is How You Lose Her*

Five years after publishing *Oscar Wao*, Díaz published his most recent short story collection, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), which marks his return to the short story form and a return to Yúnior as interlocutor. Many of the short stories, which were previously published in magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Story*, relate the continuing development of Yúnior as narrator and as a character (González 89). Once more, Díaz writes seamless spatiotemporal shifts into his narratives between short stories and often between paragraphs. For example, the first short story, which was actually first published in 1998, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” is set in the Dominican Republic and tells about the crumbling relationship between a grown-up Yúnior and Magda, his girlfriend. Several stories concern Yúnior’s development during his high school and college years while the final story, the longest in the collection, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” relates Yúnior’s subjectivity in its most present form. Only two stories differ from this model, “Otravida, Otravez” and “Invierno.” The former, told from the focalization of Yasmin, one of Ramón’s lovers, tells the story of Yasmin’s relationship with Ramon through her reading of Virta’s letters, while the latter tells the story of the de la Casas’ first days in the US during winter. The most prominent theme that courses throughout the stories in the collection is infidelity—Yúnior cheats on numerous women.

A reader of Díaz first learns about Yúnior’s cheating in *Oscar Wao* when he cheats on Lola de León, Oscar’s sister. At the end of *Oscar Wao*, Yúnior narrates that he is a professor at a community college and married to a Dominican woman from Salcedo. He claims that “I’m a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (*Oscar Wao* 326). Ostensibly, he is claiming that he is no longer cheating and that he is faithful to his wife. However, in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” the narrator says, “Your girl catches you cheating. (Well, actually she’s your fiancée, but hey, in

a bit it *so* won't matter.) She could have caught you with one sucia, she could have caught you with two, but as you're a totally batshit cuero who didn't ever empty his e-mail trash can, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still. Fifty fucking girls? God-damn" (*This Is How You Lose Her* 179). The fiancée in *This Is How* is the same wife in *Oscar Wao*, and according to the short story, Yunior was never faithful to her. In *This Is How*, Yunior cheats on every woman that he enters into a relationship with, and his cheating becomes the focus for the narration. In *Oscar Wao*, Oscar de León tells Yunior that Lola loves him and, when Yunior replies that he knows, he asks, "Why do you cheat on her [Lola], then?" (*Oscar Wao* 313). Yunior cannot name the source of his cheating, and he feels compelled to understand and overcome his infidelity but cannot until the last story of *This Is How*.

Knowing the past of Yunior in the stories of *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*, in which he grows up with Rafa and Ramón as practitioners of hypermasculinity and begins dating, moves the crux of *This Is How* toward a decolonization of love. In an interview with Paula Moya, where Díaz is talking about the characters in *Oscar Wao*, he explains, "The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love" (396-7). The narrative in *This Is How* investigates how to move *beyond* postcolonial love through decolonial love in the narrative discourse of the short stories. Citing Homi Bhabha on the definition of postcolonial, Catherine Ramsdell says, "there is the problem with the term "post," as in postcolonial.... Bhabha refers to the word "post" as "shifty" as it is used in criticism, arguing that it means only to have moved past, not moved beyond" (98). Thus, in order to move beyond the postcolonial—akin to moving beyond racism and into a postracial society—we must undergo the process of decolonization as Bhabha's notion of "post" implies. For my discussion in a literary-cultural

approach, I use the term ‘postcolonial’ as a way of reading and interpreting cultural productions, such as literature, of formerly colonized people (Nayer 122). Postcoloniality refers to the material contexts and conditions of former colonies, that is, contemporary social, economic, cultural, geographic, and political aspects of now independent nations (Nayer 124). In all three works by Díaz, the legacies of postcoloniality surrounding race, ethnicity, and gender effect every character. Now, in *This Is How*, Yunió more directly confronts the realities of postcoloniality and undergoes the process of decolonization.

In my discussion, decolonization refers to “the ongoing project of dismantling colonialism; independence does not in itself end colonial structures of political, economic, and cultural domination, or preclude the circulation of colonized sense of worldly place” (Allatson 93). Thus, decolonization attempts to destroy the colonial legacies that continue to oppress the formerly colonized, even generations after independence. The colonial legacies of the Spanish in the Caribbean continued into the Trujillato, and these legacies were the subject of *Oscar Wao*. In Díaz’s most recent collection, the discussion of postcoloniality involves the US power of coloniality because, now, Yunió narrates from the Dominican diaspora in the US. Speaking about decolonization in a US context, Emma Pérez uses the term “decolonial imaginary to define a historiographical practice by which history itself is reconciled in order to assist the Chicano/a project of social transformation” (Allatson 94). Pérez’s work looks at the subaltern construction of Chicano/as under the colonial imaginary stemming from the move towards the frontier and the West in the 19th century. And so, she posits that the decolonial imaginary would reverse the imprint of the colonial imaginary in a US context. Pérez’s term, decolonial imaginary, applies to the fiction of Díaz where he examines the colonial imaginary in the Dominican republic and in the US Northwest and attempts to decolonize his mind and imagination.

In *This Is How*, Díaz, also, explores how to decolonize love. But before decolonizing love with others, the narrative discourse implies that diasporic subjects must decolonize themselves. Near the end of his article titled, “Junot Díaz’s Search for Decolonial Aesthetics and Love,” José David Saldívar asks the following:

When we finish reading Yuniór’s book of linked stories do we comprehend that, in addition to creating a greater and cooler distance between himself and his reader, his many second-person stories are not simply focalized stories directed to his reader but are in fact stories he has been writing to his “sucio,” cheating, prevaricating self? (340).

In addition to examining the linked stories in *This Is How*, readers of Díaz’s fiction should look back at the narrative discourse and focalization of *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*. At different moments in each of his previous works, Díaz has let the narrator, Yuniór, narrate to himself. That is, “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” is directed at Yuniór. The narration in *Oscar Wao* by Yuniór points to the silences of masculinity that were formed during the Trujillato. However, Yuniór does not or cannot understand these lessons until he actively begins to decolonize his mind and his heart. I argue, thus, that based on the intertextualities between Díaz’s works of fiction, especially *Drown* and *This Is How*, the subjectivity of Yuniór cheats on itself. Yuniór betrays himself. That is, Yuniór has betrayed the epistemology learned by the reader of his narratives; the narrator does not understand his own narrations. Moreover, I argue that a colonial legacy of Dominican heteronormativity determines his *sucioness* and his eventual decolonization of his sense of self and his sense of love.

### **A Colonial Legacy in “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” and “Nilda”**

As if the actions of *Drown* and *Oscar Wao* never happened in Yuniór’s storyworld, the stories in *This Is How* repeatedly foreground the colonial mindset of a hegemonic *dominicanidad*. The two stories, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” and “Nilda,” point to the intersections between race and gender norms in postcolonial *dominicanidad*. In “The Sun, the

Moon, the Stars” Yunior narrates his return to the Dominican Republic, particularly to Santo Domingo, where he is taking a vacation with Magda, a woman that he has cheated on and is now trying to make amends for his infidelity through this trip together. Magda found out about Yunior’s cheating because the girl that he cheated with, Cassandra, wrote Magda a letter detailing her sexual relationship with Yunior. The plan to redeem himself in the Dominican Republic is not working. Magda seems more distant than before. Yunior says, "By the middle of Day 3 of our All-Quisqueya Redemption Tour we were in an air-conditioned bungalow watching HBO. Exactly where I want to be when I’m in Santo Domingo. In a fucking resort” (*This Is How* 12-3).

From this point, their relationship continues to deteriorate and while Magda explores the resort on her own, Yunior makes two friends at the bar, the Vice-President and Bárbaro. These two suspicious, ominous characters, one a well-dressed businessman and the other his bodyguard, give Yunior advice about his relationship with Magda and eventually take him to the Cave of the Jagua, which means a tree that bears black fruit (Balée 341). The Cave of the Jagua is the purported birthplace of the Taínos, the indigenous peoples of Hispaniola and other islands. And so the Vice-President and Bárbaro give Yunior a flashlight and lower him by his ankles into the dark cave. In the darkness Yunior thinks about the first time that he met Magda when they were at Rutgers. Yunior says, “And that’s when I know it’s over. As soon as you start thinking about the beginning, it’s the end” (*This Is How* 24). Here, the narrative discourse doubles its meaning: Yunior is not only talking about the end of his relationship with Magda but also about the beginning of the end of his cheating. In the darkness, Yunior begins to cry, and when he is pulled up, the “Vice-President says, indignantly, God, you don’t have to be a pussy about it” (*This Is How* 25).

Similar to the scene in “Ysrael,” in which Rafa misrecognizes Yuniór’s reasons for crying following the episode on the bus, here, the Vice-President misrecognizes why Yuniór is crying. He is not crying because he feels a magical connection to his ancestral roots rather he is crying because he feels regret over his collapsing relationship with Magda. Since “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” is in a privileged position as the first short story in the collection, it establishes both a theme for the collection and a move towards closure for the narrative. In *Drown*, Rafa wears the mask of Trujillo and participates in the hegemonic notion of *tíguerismo*, while Yuniór does not subscribe to this type of hypermasculinity as a child and early adolescent as seen in the rest of the collection—although he tries in “How to Date”. Now, in *This Is How*, Yuniór begins the process of removing his mask of Trujillo, his mask of *tíguerismo*, a mask that he adopted in *Oscar Wao*. This moment of emotion links strongly to the last and longest short story in *This Is How*, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” which serves both as a climax and denouement for the collection.

However, before the narrative finds closure in the final story, Yuniór narrates several heart-breaking stories of violence and racism linked to hypermasculinity as exhibited by the presence of Rafa and the absence of Ramón. Although stories of Rafa’s cheating and *tíguerismo* appear in *Drown*, the difference in these stories about Rafa’s cheating is the US context. More specifically, Rafa’s hypermasculinity is now seen in the neighborhoods of New Jersey rather than the Dominican Republic and the displacement to a poor neighborhood in the Global North contributes to Rafa’s shocking diagnosis of cancer. One of these stories within the US context concerns Nilda, one of Rafa’s *sucias*. In addition to sharing a name with the American mistress of Ramón in “Negocios” from *Drown*, Nilda represents another sexually exploited Dominican woman by *tíguerismo*. In fact, Yuniór narrates, “Nilda was my brother’s girlfriend. This is how

all these stories begin” (*This Is How* 29). Yunior is simultaneously commenting on Rafa’s rotating door of girlfriends and on the effects of *tiguerismo*. At the beginning of the story, Nilda “had super-long hair, like those Pentecostal girls, and a chest you wouldn’t believe—I’m talking world-class” (*This Is How* 30). By the end of the story, Yunior says, “A couple of years later I went away to college and I don’t know where the fuck she went” (*This Is How* 43). As one of Rafa’s many sexual conquests, Nilda becomes a case study of the effects of *tiguerismo* where between the first and last mention of Nilda she is passed around young and old men who use and waste her body. Despite dating Nilda for a summer, Rafa always had “mad girls in orbit. Like this one piece of white trash from Sayreville, and this morena from Nieuw Amsterdam Village who also slept over and sounded like a freight train when they did it. I don’t remember her name, but I do remember how her perm shone in the glow of our night-light” (*This Is How* 37). And behind all of Rafa’s *sucioness* and Yunior’s budding *tiguerismo* is the absence of Ramón, their father. In “Nilda,” Yunior tells the reader that he has left their family for a twenty-five-year old. Yunior continues, “We rarely talked about our father. Me, I was just happy not to be getting my ass kicked in anymore but once right at the beginning of the Last Great Absence I asked my brother where he thought he was, and Rafa said, Like I fucking care. End of conversation. World without end. (*This Is How* 36). Ramón only appears once in *This Is How*, in “Otravida, Otravez,” which is narrated by one of Ramón’s *sucias* Yasmin. Ramón, who has been in and out of Yunior’s life, only meant physical abuse for Yunior; for Rafa, Ramón was a role model, a *tiguere*.

According to Yunior’s maturing focalization, the discourse of hypermasculinity shifts from *tiguere* to *sucio/a* in *This Is How*. Deborah Vargas, in her article titled “Sucia Love: Losing,

Lying, and Leaving in *This Is How You Lose Her*,” explains the nuances of the gendered terms *sucio* and *sucia* by saying that they are:

composed of three racialized, ideological discourses: genders and sexualities of color as lewd, obscene, offensive hypersexually undisciplined bodies; darkened, suspect citizens perpetually untrustworthy, impure, and disloyal to the state; diseased subjects of “cultures of poverty,” overdetermined at failing to arrive at normative womanhood and manhood. (353)

Whereas the term *tiguere* carries a sense of masculine pride through sexual conquest, the term *sucio*, which translates as ‘dirty, unclean,’ carries a sense of self-deprecation and guilt. In the following short stories, Yunior becomes a *sucio* just like his father and his brother as the masculine scripts of the hegemonic notions of *dominicanidad* demand.

### **“Miss Lora” and Yunior**

In one of the longest and the second to last story in *This Is How*, “Miss Lora,” Yunior narrates his sexual relationship with a high school teacher, Miss Lora, an unwed, childless woman with a sinewy physique. Several stories in *This Is How* narrate how Yunior cheats on his girlfriends such as “Alma” and “Flaca;” these two stories occur after the narrative time of “Miss Lora.” The actions in “Miss Lora” happen primarily during Yunior’s high school years with a brief, final scene during his college graduation and a moment in the Dominican Republic when he is searching for Miss Lora after she leaves London Terrace. Therefore, before Yunior becomes a bona fide *tiguere* in *This Is How* and in *Oscar Wao*, in which he narrates his college years, he is a sixteen-year-old smart, bookish high school student who has nightmares about the apocalypse. Yunior is an educated individual who attended and graduated from Rutgers University, and before his college years he was always known as the ‘smart one.’ In fact, Yunior says, “I was fourteen and reading *Dhalgren* for the second time; I had an IQ that would have broken you in two but I would have traded it in for a halfway decent face in a second (*This Is*

*How* 31). Yunior constantly inserts obscure and erudite references into his narration and uses cerebral vocabulary, such as ‘fulgurating,’ ‘septentrionales,’ and ‘pelagic.’ Since Yunior is an intelligent individual and has seen the destructive and violent effects of cheating, why does Yunior, the double of Ysrael and Oscar, become a total *sucio*? In this manner, Yunior becomes a subjectivity cheating on itself, a subject who betrays himself, and he does not realize it until an epiphany in the final story.

Moreover, the second-person focalization of “Miss Lora” and Miss Lora, herself, point towards Yunior’s self-cheating. As mentioned above, the stories narrated by Yunior that are told in the second-person are meant as much for his subjects as they are for him; he is at once both the narrator and the narratee. “Miss Lora” begins in the same way: “Years later you would wonder if it hadn’t been for your brother would you have done it?” (*This Is How* 153). ‘It’ refers to having a sexual relationship with Miss Lora—a relationship between a middle aged woman and a sixteen year old. Yunior questions his intellectual understanding with his first statement because he knows the heart-breaking effects of performing hypermasculinity. Thus, he concludes that he would not have entered into the relationship if Rafa had not been a constant presence of *tíguerismo*. In order to understand Rafa, Yunior begins to mimic his behavior. However, interestingly, Rafa dies from cancer before the narrative time of “Miss Lora” when Rafa is nineteen. Rafa is first diagnosed with cancer in “Nilda” where he becomes very sick and continues to deteriorate physically and mentally in “The Pura Principle.” Still, in these short stories, he performs the scripts of Dominican hypermasculinity and sleeps with Nilda, Pura, and numerous other women. At the beginning of “Miss Lora,” Rafa has been dead a year, and he, now, like Ramón has become a powerful presence *in absentia*.

In a nod towards *Oscar Wao*, the relationship between Miss Lora and Yuniór begins over their fear or fascination with the apocalypse. Yuniór narrates, “It was 1985. You were sixteen years old and you were messed up and alone like a motherfucker. You also were convinced — like totally utterly convinced — that the world was going to blow itself to pieces” (*This Is How* 155). As previously mentioned, the theme of the apocalypse, or revelation, started in *Oscar Wao* where revelation became tied to a fall, which stemmed from *fukú*, or the curse of the New World. For the pubescent Yuniór, the apocalypse in “Miss Lora” signals his early death before having sex with a woman—the same fear that Oscar de León felt. Yuniór narrates:

Almost every night you had nightmares that made the ones the president was having in *Dreamscape* look like pussyplay. In your dreams the bombs were always going off, evaporating you while you walked, while you ate a chicken wing, while you took the bus to school, while you fucked Paloma. You would wake up biting your own tongue in terror, the blood dribbling down your chin. (*This Is How* 155)

Yuniór’s nightmares reflect his perceived inadequacies as a Dominican male who is not yet a *tíguere*. When Yuniór bites his tongue because he is tormented through nightmares that he is not a typical Dominican male, this detail references Ysrael from *Drown*. In “No Face,” the second to last story in *Drown*, Ysrael has nightmares about the night when the pig attacked him and mutilated his face as an infant. The narrator says, “When he awakens he’s screaming and blood braids down his neck; he’s bitten his tongue and it swells and he cannot sleep again until he tells himself to be a man” (*Drown* 158). This link across collections sets both Ysrael and Yuniór outside of heteronormative *dominicanidad*.

In “Miss Lora,” Yuniór’s girlfriend is Paloma, a studious Dominican girl who does not sleep with Yuniór because she fears that if she gets pregnant she will keep the baby and never leave her suffocating family, let alone go to college. Yuniór says, “Paloma was convinced that if she made *any mistakes* in the next two years, *any mistakes at all*, she would be stuck in that

family of hers forever. That was *her* nightmare (*This Is How* 155). Paloma fears becoming a *sucia*. Speaking more on the term ‘*sucia*,’ Vargas explains, “The term *sucias* is understood in this collection of stories as a Latino vernacular for those racialized feminine genders and sexualities deemed literally, and figuratively unclean, as racial sexualized others, as filthy and nasty” (352). Yuniór only fully understands the word ‘*sucia*’ when Rafa in “Fiesta, 1980” terms Ramón’s Puerto Rican mistress as a *sucia*. However, he has never been the *tíguere* who possesses *sucias* like his brother and father. Paloma never becomes one of Yuniór’s *sucias*, and when she finishes high school she leaves for college, leaving behind her oppressive family and Yuniór who stays in London Terrace. The dichotomy between Miss Lora and Paloma marks Yuniór’s interest in Miss Lora over Paloma as nuanced. Speaking to this nuance, Christopher González writes, “Interestingly, although Paloma is Yuniór’s ostensible girlfriend in the story, he never describes her body. That is to say, her body does not drive his behavior the way other women in other stories have done, Nilda, Flaca, or Alma” (107). Perhaps, Paloma’s denial of her body to Yuniór limits his focalization; nevertheless, it is not Paloma’s body that strikes Yuniór’s desire but Miss Lora’s body, which represents a queering, or unsettling, of feminine *dominicanidad*.

As opposed to the stereotypical curvy women in other stories in *This Is How*, Miss Lora does not fit the profile of an attractive Dominican woman according to hegemonic norms. Yuniór says, “Miss Lora was too skinny. Had no hips whatsoever. No breasts, either, no ass, even her hair failed to make the grade. She had her eyes, sure, but what she was most famous for in the neighborhood were her muscles” (*This Is How* 157). Her description as a woman with muscles queers her *dominicanidad* in Yuniór’s narration. This queering of sexual norms and identity in the narrative discourse references back to “Drown,” where the narrator, possibly Yuniór, has a

queer encounter with Beto. Yuniór's *sucioness* incorporates a degree of queering of masculine and feminine sexual norms in *dominicanidad*.

After the first sexual encounter between Yuniór and Miss Lora, Yuniór narrates:

Both your father and your brother were sucios. Shit, your father used to take you on his pussy runs, leave you in the car while he ran up into cribs to bone his girlfriends. Your brother was no better, boning girls in the bed next to yours. 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. (*This Is How* 165)

Yuniór, here, self identifies as a *sucio*. Since he cites examples of his father's and brother's hypermasculine behavior in a negative tone, Yuniór sees *sucioness* as a genetic curse. However, he joins the ranks of *sucios* despite his own contempt for *sucioness* and the destruction associated with *sucioness* as he has narrated in *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*. Thus, he betrays everything that he knows about meaningful relationships; he betrays himself. Yuniór becomes a *sucio* and Miss Lora becomes his *sucia* for several years until he graduates high school. Beginning with Miss Lora and Paloma, Yuniór's *tíguerismo* will continue to break hearts according to the colonial mindset of hypermasculinity; only in the final story of *This Is How* does Yuniór begin to decolonize his heart.

### **Towards a Decolonial Love in "The Cheater's Guide to Love"**

From the beginning of *This Is How*, Yuniór narrates stories about his brother's cheating, his father's cheating, and, most importantly, his own cheating. Although the names of characters change, the story of the cheater is always the same; he or she will cheat again and again. Seymour Chatman called the constituent, necessary events of a story—in order for that story to be the story that it is—kernels, and he called the supplementary events satellites (Abbott 22-3). In the narratives of Díaz, the kernels are the cheater and the cheated on, or the betrayer and the betrayed. In "Alma," Yuniór cheats on Alma with Laxmi; in "Flaca," Yuniór cheats on Veronica,

or Flaca, with nameless, countless women; and in “Miss Lora,” Yunior cheats on Paloma with Miss Lora. I argue, also, that in *This Is How* Yunior cheats on himself. In an interview with Paula Moya where Díaz is talking about Yunior’s problems in *This Is How*, he explains, “Yunior’s desire for communion with self and with other is finally undermined by his inability, his unwillingness, to see the women in his life as fully human” (396). As long as Yunior is cheating on women, he continues cheating on himself. Moreover, he cheats on women because he cannot find a shared humanity in the women of his narratives.

In “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” Yunior starts his narrative of the story and of the collection by saying, “I’m not a bad guy” (*This Is How* 3). Given Yunior’s focalization in *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*, the reader already knows that Yunior is an unreliable narrator. The stories that he narrates, often, require reading between the lines to see the whole picture. His narratives, including the narratives of himself, are constructed; they are constructed by a colonial mindset. Further along in the story, when Yunior is talking about his cheating on Magda with Cassandra, Yunior says, “She considers me a typical Dominican man: a sucio, an asshole,” and he goes on to say, “All of Magda’s friends say I cheated because I was Dominican, that all us Dominican men are dogs and can’t be trusted. I doubt that I can speak for all Dominican men but I doubt they can either. From my perspective it wasn’t genetics; there were reasons. Causalities” (3, 18-19). The causalities that Yunior concedes as a reason for his cheating is another name for coloniality, or another name for Dominican heteronormativity, and throughout Yunior’s narratives these causalities go by various names, including *tíguerismo*, *fukú*, and Trujillo. More specifically, these causalities are the absence of a father, a construction of imaginary masculinity, the Trujillato, the death of Rafa, the masculinity of violence and infidelity of Ramón, and, finally, the colonial mindset of hegemonic race, ethnicity, and gender performance. According to H.

Porter Abbott, the impression of causalities is important and powerful because they suggest normality or confer normalization (41). It is normal for Dominican men to cheat, it is normal for Dominican women to become *sucias*. Narratives hold powerful influences on imaginaries, and the narratives of Dominican heteronormativity normalize *sucio/ness*.

However, this first statement from the first short story also shows Yuniór a way out of the normalization of infidelity and hypermasculinity. Talking about hidden and naturalized textual ideologies, Mieke Bal says that non-narrative comments are often ideological statements and by examining the alternation between narrative and non-narrative comments shows an overt ideology and a hidden ideology (31). By starting the first story with this statement that the reader knows is false, the narrative discourse of the rest of the stories reads that Yuniór feels remorse for lying in his first statement and for his cheating. And he will eventually take steps to end it.

In “Nilda,” Yuniór says, “in this world I had a brother who was dying of cancer and a long dark patch of life like a mile of black ice waiting for me up ahead” (*This Is How* 38). The anxiety in Yuniór’s words prelude his apocalyptic fears. Yuniór fears the future, and he characterizes it as a dangerous path with hidden perils. These perils are the causalities of heteronormative Dominican masculinity. Yuniór speaks these anxious words before Miss Lora, before Alma, before Magda, and before Flaca—that is, before his cheating days. By the final story in the collection, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Rafa is dead, and Yuniór’s unknown path ironically seems predetermined by hegemonic masculinity. Yuniór will follow in the footsteps of his father and his brother. But Lola, Yuniór’s truest love, from *Oscar Wao* shows Yuniór many, many years later a path off the black ice. After her crisis of identity in *Oscar Wao*, Lola says in an internal monologue, “But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about”

(*Oscar Wao* 209). Lola seeks to run away from La Inca and her mother, Beli, but she recognizes the truth that she can never run away not from her *dominicanidad* and not from herself. Lola wages an internal war against her constructed toxins that limit her humanity: normative Dominican femininity, curvy-Latina stereotype, and white supremacy. Díaz creates another link between his works in showing Yuniór an alternative *dominicanidad*. Lola says her monologue in the second section of *Oscar Wao*, which is entirely narrated from Lola's focalization, but I believe that Yuniór as the narrator must have listened to her words in this section in order to write them. Thus, Yuniór must conquer his anxiety of the future and decolonize his heart and his love.

The final short story of *This Is How*, "The Cheater's Guide to Love," outlines Yuniór's decolonization and shows striking parallels between Yuniór and the narrative of Ramón in "Negocios" from *Drown*, as part of his decolonization. This final story narrates the five years after Yuniór's fiancée leaves him for cheating on her with fifty women over a six-year period. Initially, he repents and tries to redeem himself, but his ex-fiancée, who is never named, does not entertain any ideas of a rekindling. For the next few years, Yuniór meets women and cheats on them; he is a college professor in Boston who takes up running and yoga but suffers injuries that end these activities all together.

Yuniór's decolonization must rectify reified notions of Dominican (American) racism, misogyny, ethnocentrism, disability, and masculinity related to the colonial mindset of diasporic subjects, including Ramón's. As seen in *Drown*, Dominicans are racist towards Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans, and in *Oscar Wao*, the Trujillato prompted the literal and metaphorical erasure of Afro-Dominicans with dark skin and 'pelo malo.' In "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Yuniór displays his own racism and misogyny when he says:

*Only a bitch of color comes to Harvard to get pregnant. White women don't do that. Asian women don't do that. Only fucking black and Latina women. Why go to all the trouble to get into Harvard just to get knocked up? You could have stayed on the block and done that shit.*

This is what you write in your journal. (202)

Yunior writes these words in his journal after a woman of color who he previously slept with shows up at his apartment with all her belongings and the surprising news that he is the father of her baby. In the quotation, Yunior assigns a racialized hypersexuality to women of color that is not, according to him, inherent in Anglo-American women or Asian women. As a victim of racism in Boston himself where security always checks his ID on campus, Yunior knows the violence of racism. By writing this racist, misogynist comment in his journal, Yunior narrates his own internalized colonial mindset. Also, he transfers this internalized racism into the writing process, which for him functions as an archive and, in a way, a step past the content of the writing, in other words decolonization.

In addition to expressing racist sentiments and experiencing racist moments, Yunior confronts the hegemonic notions of *dominicanidad*. One of his *sucias* during the third year of “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” who is also racist towards Haitians, questions Yunior’s Dominicaness. Yunior narrates, “She’s always trying to prove you’re not Dominican. If I’m not Dominican then no one is, you shoot back, but she laughs at that. Say that in Spanish, she challenges and of course you can’t” (*This Is How* 197). The Dominican woman ascribes to the idea that true Dominicans speak Spanish fluently, which is ascribing to a Eurocentric ethnocentrism that privileges Hispanic roots as the standard for Dominicaness. However, Yunior asserts that like Pérez Firmat, the author of the epigraph in *Drown*, he is a creole Dominican, or a true Dominican who does not fluently speak Spanish—he doesn’t belong to Dominicaness but he belongs nowhere else. Whereas Ramón was often mistaken for other

nationalities and ethnicities in “Negocios,” Yuniór experiences a more nuanced ethnocentrism, in the same way that overt racism rarely exists while pernicious unconscious racism thrives in an institutionalized way.

Finally, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” outlines Yuniór’s process of decolonization that seems to emulate aspect of his father’s own process of change in “Negocios.” These parallels between Yuniór and Ramón point to shared moments of crisis but with different outcomes. First, from a narratological perspective, the two stories share similarities, such as the privileged position of the final stories in each collection, the longest length in each collection, and the most narrative time covered; second, these stories differ in one key way: “Negocios” is told from a third-person focalization, Yuniór’s construction of the past, while “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” is told from a second-person focalization, Yuniór’s interpretation of the recent past and present. As mentioned above, the second-person focalization allows Díaz to comment not only on the narrator’s subjects but also on the narrator himself. Thus, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” is written by Yuniór and for Yuniór.

The parallels between the last story in *Drown* and the last story in *This Is How* are the following: both Yuniór and Ramón suffer physical injuries, both write to or about the people that they betrayed, both have a faithful friend—Elvis and Jo-Jo—, both experience heartaches, and both realize their apocalypses, or revelations. First, the narrative discourse of both short stories show Yuniór and Ramón becoming disabled characters.<sup>10</sup> Yuniór becomes a disabled subject after he suffers plantar fasciitis, a foot injury from running, a ruptured disc, a back injury from yoga, and stenosis, nerve damage from heavy manual labor, i.e., delivering pool tables, which Yuniór does in “Edison, New Jersey.” Ramón suffers a spinal injury during his “tendon-ripping labor” at Reynolds Aluminum (*Drown* 194). While Yuniór’s injuries are in one way or another

related to his cheating, loss of his wife-to-be, and depression, Ramón's injuries are related to nostalgia.

The term nostalgia comes from the Greek words *nostos*, meaning home, and *algia*, meaning pain or suffering (Goodman 199). Suffering from his want of home, Ramón is nostalgic for the Dominican Republic, for a warm climate, and for his family. Ramón's absence and willful neglect of his family symbolically and literally injures him. In the final paragraphs of "Negocios," he boards a plane back to the Dominican Republic to finally bring his family back to the US after a five-year absence.

Whereas Yuniór's father experiences pain and suffering from nostalgia, I argue that Yuniór experiences physical injuries as a symbol of the decolonization of his love and heart. In her article titled, "The Decolonizer's Guide to Disability," Julie Avril Minich says, "The decolonization of disability is a central (but overlooked) problem in Díaz's fiction" (50). Although Minich's argument focuses on Ysrael's colonial disability, she also says that in *This Is How* the narrative links bodily deterioration to misogyny and an eventual decolonization of consciousness (61-2). Minich's argument attempts to dismantle colonialism surrounding disability where disabled bodies are marginalized. For Rafa, his disability is linked both to the poetically described landfills that are adjacent to the neighborhoods of incoming immigrants as seen in "Invierno," and to his rampant hypermasculinity that until his dying breath coerces him to be a womanizer. For Yuniór, his disability is also related to his hypermasculinity but leads not to death but a renewal in consciousness, or a decolonization of his heart.

In addition to suffering physical and emotional injuries, both Ramón and Yuniór write about their experiences as a way to archive their pain. Yasmin narrates in "Otravida, Otravez" that Ramón writes letters to Virta during his absence, and she often reads Virta's responses.

Yasmin, in a relationship with Ramón during the narrative time of “Otravida, Otravez,” finds eight years’ worth of letters between Ramón and Virta. She says, “He claims that he stopped writing to her the year before, but that’s not true. Every month I drop by his apartment with his laundry and read the new letters she has sent, the ones he stashes under his bed” (*This Is How* 61). Although Ramón writes letters to Virta, he archives and hides them. In effect, Ramón archives his pain, which eventually leads him back to Virta and his children.

Yunior participates in the same type of archiving; he is caught cheating because he did not empty his e-mail trashcan that had emails between him and fifty other women. Near the end of “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Yunior opens a folder that he has hidden under his bed, The Doomsday Book, which his ex-fiancée compiled—copies of all his e-mails and photos during his cheating days. A note written by his ex-fiancée reads, “*Dear Yunior, for your next book*” (*This Is How* 216). Here, readers realize that Yunior’s construction from this archive, The Doomsday Book, is the book that they nearly finished reading: *This Is How You Lose Her*. Then, Yunior’s final apocalypse occurs; he decolonizes his love and views women as human. Yunior says, “You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit it but it’s true. You are astounded by the depths of your mendacity. When you finish the Book a second time you say the truth: You did the right thing, negra. You did the right thing” (*This Is How* 216). The mendacity that Yunior refers to is how far he cheated on himself as well as how much he cheated on women. Yunior recognizes the revelation that his hypermasculinity was a mask for cowardice in the face of real humanity, real women. He recognizes the pain his lies caused, and he recognizes that the humanity in his ex-fiancée could never love a cheater. In this way, Yunior decolonizes his love and his heart from the colonial mindset of hypermasculinity and misogyny.

The aftermath of Yuniór's apocalypse differs greatly from Ramón's. Looking back at the narrative structure of "Negocios" will better illustrate how different the outcomes are for Yuniór and Ramón. The end of the collection in *Drown* is a return to the beginning of the narrative where the reader first encounters Rafa and Yuniór heading to the *colmado* for a beer for their *tío*. In the final paragraphs, the narrator says that Ramón left Nilda in December of 1979 and flew south to get his family. Circularity plays a pivotal role in several of the short stories in *Drown* as it does in "Negocios." In "Aurora," the circularity of drugs, violence, and addiction holds Aurora and the narrator in a destructive cycle, and in "Drown," the lack of upward mobility and a rigid heteronormative epistemology "structures the neurotic circularity" of the short story and narrator (Frydman 140). Despite the ostensible privileging of masculinity, the narrative structure of "Negocios" aligns more with feminist fiction than the quest or the male plot of ambition. David Herman characterizes the male plot of ambition in the following:

This plot is characterized by a quest-like progression that moves in a chronological sequence from a perceived beginning to a conclusion where obstacles have been overcome and goals achieved. . . . In addition, the pattern often reinforces masculine behavior (for example, undertaking quests would be socially proscribed for women in certain contexts), and in psychoanalytic terms mirrors a male, heterosexual pattern of erotic desire, typified as a move towards climax and release of narrative tension. (Herman 198)

Rather than employing the male plot of ambition, Díaz develops Yuniór's identity through retroversions and anticipations, through analepses and prolepses. The characteristic use of spatiotemporal shifts aligns the narrative to the more alternative patterns of feminist fiction that includes fragmentation of plot, an openhandedness, and an undefined outcome. (Herman 199). The undefined outcome of "Negocios" allows an interpretation and forecasting for the future development of Yuniór because the third-person narrator finally gives Ramón a full name: Ramón de las Casas. The naming in full of Ramón makes the reader realize that Yuniór shares

his father's name, i.e., Ramón de las Casas, Jr. Completing a better picture of Yuniór foreshadows a further mirroring between Ramón and Yuniór in future narratives as seen in *Oscar Wao* and *This Is How You Lose Her* where Yuniór becomes a carbon copy of Ramón's *tíguerismo*. In the final paragraphs of "Negocios," Ramón experiences the apocalypse of a mental breakdown due to his physical suffering and his painful nostalgia, and he returns for his family. In "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Yuniór begins anew with a decolonized heart and returns to a narrative creation; he says, "In the months that follow you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace — and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get" (*This Is How* 217). Finally, Yuniór stops cheating on himself and gets a new start at real decolonized love.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Díaz suggests that Yuniór has achieved a type of decolonization, and Yuniór, now, participates in a decolonized *dominicanidad*. *This Is How* uses the theme of infidelity to showcase how Yuniór's subjectivity cheats on itself through most of the collection until the final story; the collection also tells the genesis of Yuniór's active participation in hypermasculinity in "Miss Lora," while mirroring the narratives of "Negocios" in "The Cheater's Guide to Love," which forces both Yuniór and Ramón to face their apocalypse, or their revelations. For Yuniór, the course of his revelation goes all the way back to the *campo* when he was nine on their way to visit Ysrael; he unconsciously recognizes that his revelation is related to the frequency of his cheating; and finally he suffers physical disability to symbolize his decolonization, which is his final revelation.

At the end of "The Cheater's Guide to Love," the story of Yuniór as Díaz's literary alter-ego and narrator seems to reach closure, rather than circularity. I believe that the new start to

Yunior's identity, although realized in one short story, goes back to the first collection, *Drown*, especially "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie." Then, Yunior's narration of the de León and Cabral family histories further push Yunior towards decolonization, if only in better understanding the problem, let alone remedying it. And so, it seems that Yunior's story has reached an end. However, Díaz's most recent published fiction, "Monstro," which is an excerpt from a possible, future novel, also uses a male Dominican narrator who "speaks in a similar style to Yunior" (González 133). The narrator is never named, but, I believe, Díaz's greatest achievement, Yunior, is never far from Díaz's mind. And Yunior's storytelling as a character narrator achieves a compelling blend of style, social criticism, and humor.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat is a Cuban-American poet and essayist. He has written important prose works in Latino/a studies, including *Life on the Hyphen*, which examines the influences of Latinos/as on American culture by chronicling his own life and the lives of famous Cuban-Americans, such as Desi Arnaz, Oscar Hijuelos, and Gloria Estefan. The title refers to a hybrid existence that Cubans live in American culture.

<sup>2</sup> In her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes a 'new race,' the new *mestiza* as a lesbian Chicana. Anzaldúa's work attempts to unsettle the binaries of gender and ethnicity, especially through a negotiation of language.

<sup>3</sup> Previous publications found in the bibliography page of the the 2006 reprint of *Drown* by Riverhead Books, cf. "Bibliography."

<sup>4</sup> The six stories mentioned above explicitly name or refer to Yuniors as the narrator. Only two short stories depart from the first-person narration, "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" and "No Face," which have second-person and third-person narrators, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Alvarez, a Dominican-American author, is known for *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). Her works deal with interculturalism in the US and a negotiation of the Trujillato in the Dominican Republic as a member of the middle class and as a daughter of a politically active father. His involvement in subversive politics led to the Alvarez family's forced migration to the US in the 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> Both *choca* and *toto* are terms in Dominican slang for 'vagina.'

<sup>7</sup> Trujillo's La Guardia controlled many aspects of his police state, and La Guardia often committed acts of violence on Trujillo's behalf. One of the most infamous instances occurred in 1937 where Trujillo ordered La Guardia to kill with machetes thousands of Haitians who lived on the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The genocide was covered up by the Trujillato and masked as an internal conflict between Haitian peasants (Suárez 40).

<sup>8</sup> In Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, she explains the following:

The "performative" dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms....Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. (94-5)

Butler identifies Yuniors's repeated performances with women stems from his reiteration of the normality that he saw growing up with Rafa and Ramón. He is performing through masks of masculinity according to the race, ethnicity, and sexuality of the women in "How to Date."

<sup>9</sup> Galactus exists in the Marvel Universe and first appears in the *Fantastic Four* series of the 1960s. Derived from mythical and unknown origins, Galactus represents an existential threat to the worlds of the Marvel Universe, including Earth for he is known as Devourer of Worlds. Galactus must feed periodically by devouring worlds. In the action of the *Fantastic Four* series, Galactus seeks to destroy Earth, and he easily defeats the Fantastic Four. Luckily, the human heroes are helped by the extraterrestrial, Uatu the Watcher, who helps the Fantastic Four avoid the destruction of Earth.

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<sup>10</sup> Disability through the three works of fiction affects several characters, including Ysrael whose face is disfigured, Wilquins who is mute, Beli who suffers from breast cancer, and Rafa who develops leukemia in *This Is How* and dies before the final short story.