

## Dueling Masculinities: Oscar's and Yunior's Journey to Manhood

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Yunior, the narrator of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is portrayed as a true Dominican male. Yunior embodies the Latin American stereotypes of masculinity, *el machismo*, which Marysol Asencio discusses in her article "Machos and Sluts: Gender, Sexuality, and Violence among a Cohort of Puerto Rican Adolescents." She summarizes *machismo* as the view that a man must: dominate subordinate women, control female sexuality through physical violence and verbal aggression, act on an increased sexual drive (which leads to double-standards), revere the mother, protect and provide for their family, and project feelings of invulnerability, courage, honor, respect, and dignity (109). At first, it seems as though Oscar, the title character, is included and depicted largely to enhance the image of the narrator in the mind of the reader, but through a deconstructive argument it becomes clear that Oscar plays a guiding role in Yunior's comprehensive masculinity.

Oscar is seemingly opposite on the masculinity spectrum of Yunior's *machismo*. Yet, while he is emasculated in many ways throughout the novel, it is important that he is still a man and not female. This distinction relies on the acknowledgement that in Dominican and other Latin American cultures women are of a lower social standing than men, no matter how non-masculine the man is. Díaz's novel provides three strong, female characters, who, although commended by Yunior for acting as masculine as possible, are still hopelessly female and thus forever below any of the male characters in the novel, even the evil Trujillo. This can be seen through the constant sexualization of their bodies in Yunior's descriptions and also by the sexual violence directed against them. Yunior sums up the problem neatly when he says, "But what could she do? Beli was a girl, for fuck's sake. She had no real power..." (Díaz 81). In her study on Puerto Rican

teenagers in America, Asencio finds that women “emphasized that ‘behaving right’ and ‘traveling with someone,’ preferably a boyfriend, offered them more protection” against street violence (111). She goes on to say that this is ironic because “some of these same young women identified their boyfriends as a major source of violence” (112). Lola and almost certainly Beli experience similar double standards and sexualized violence in the novel, which shows that while strong characters they are not beyond the grasp of *machismo*.

By making Oscar as non-masculine as possible, while still maintaining his maleness, Díaz creates a character that cannot seem to get ahead in any culturally respected ways, whether through sexual conquest or the accumulation of wealth. Asencio finds that that “According to these young people ... the opposite of a macho is an effeminate male or self-identified homosexual male” (118). While Oscar is not homosexual, he is clearly relegated to the lowest class of men in the novel: the effeminate man. Oscar never suffers the sexualized violence that is relegated to women or homosexuals, but he is “treated like a woman” in that he is beaten and challenged by women.

One male interviewee in Asencio’s study says “A girl needs to be taught not to be a slut. That's why you keep her under close control. If you don't, she be like a guy but the opposite goes for the guy. If you treat him like a girl, he'll never be a man,” of the importance of teaching sexuality to male children (116). This seems to be the case for Oscar, who, with no father-figure in his life with the exception of his crack head, alcoholic uncle, was never taught the importance of masculine traits. Yet, upon closer inspection, one observes many instances where Oscar’s supposed, non-masculine “weaknesses” not only benefit other characters but also are instrumental in making Yuniór into a man.

Oscar’s demasculization begins when, at the age of seven, he is ‘caught’ crying over a girl.

Prior to this event, Oscar was viewed in the community as a “little Rubirosa,” a Dominican playboy who slept with the most beautiful and rich women in the world. He even was able to maintain a relationship with two girls at the same time for a week before being forced to choose and being subsequently dumped by the girl he chose. His mother advocates the use of violence to assert his dominance over the girl, yet Oscar would never fight. Yuniór says, “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,” referring to this situation (15). Yuniór seems to believe that a father figure would not have been able to make Oscar violent because non-violence was simply in Oscar’s nature. This lack of ‘game’ is largely assumed to be part of the family curse, but the curse’s function is more complex and subtle than preventing the de León line from continuing.

The novel begins with a description of the *fukú*, or curse, which can be read as a manifestation of the masculine ideals imposed on the Dominican Republic herself. Díaz writes that the *fukú* is also “called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices” (1). The Admiral, Christopher Columbus, is described here as helping the land to give birth to its own curse and also as a victim of the curse that he cannot control. This description is in-line with the tradition of exploration literature that treats the land as a female to be explored and conquered and the foreign male as both protector and exploiter. Ascencio paraphrases anthropologist Kristi Stølen’s description of this duality:

[T]he concept of Latino masculinity possesses a "contradictory duality" in terms of females. A male must control and protect "his" females (wife, daughter, girlfriend) from other predatory males while he attempts to seduce other females. This masculine dualism

of predator and protector of females entails classification of females as either "good" and deserving of protection or "bad" and deserving of exploitation. (109).

This early example of conflicted masculinity, where *machismo* is at once presented as evil and exploitive yet necessary for the current existence of any of the characters, foreshadows the complexity with which Díaz understands masculinity and seeks to help readers understand as well.

In accordance with *machismo*, Oscar would have to be much more forceful than he is in order to dominate and control women sexually. Oscar focuses on the positive aspects of female sexuality; he becomes obsessed with many women throughout the novel because of their beauty, their bodies, and his sexual fantasies involving them. Yet, unlike Trujillo, Yuniór, and every other male in this novel, Oscar will not be forceful with a woman. Instead of adopting a *machismo* attitude, Oscar is just honest and loving, if a little too persistent, in his pursuits of women. Readers sympathize with Oscar, and thus see his actions as harmless and even good in contrast with the extremes of sexual violence on the part of Trujillo.

Díaz sets up Trujillo, the former dictator of the Dominican Republic, as the ultimate embodiment of the ideals of *el machismo*, yet this character is almost completely evil in the eyes of the characters in the novel. It is striking that Díaz seems to attempt to use Oscar's lack of masculinity to show the necessity of hyper-masculinity in Yuniór's character and then to have such an evil, hyper-masculine character as the antagonist extraordinaire of the novel. Trujillo is described in historical accounts of Dominican history using the same exploration language of a masculine explorer conquering the feminine land. Of Trujillo, Doris Summer says in her article "Populism as Rhetoric: the Case of the Dominican Republic," "The significance of the macho as the national hero who overcomes both political and sexual impotence is evident here. It should

also be evident that his Woman-Land is literally the object of the macho's dual activity as fighter and father. She is the prize of his struggle and the resource for his work” (253). Trujillo humiliated, jailed, tortured and killed those who opposed him, shown through Abelard’s treatment in the novel. Yuniór speculates that Abelard’s writings were the real cause of this treatment, because Trujillo was afraid of the political ramifications of his works.

Trujillo’s overt sexuality is seen in his legendary pursuit of women, symbolized by his supposed interest in Abelard’s daughter, Jacqueline. Yuniór says of Trujillo: “Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass” (217). Here, ‘scour’ is an example of physical violence towards the land, consistent with conquering language, and ‘piece of ass’ indicates the sexual nature of this search of the land. It is a search for women by means of a revealing and harsh search of the female land. If Díaz were trying to elevate masculinity, as the dichotomy between Oscar and Yuniór initially suggests, why would he describe Trujillo constantly as hyper-masculine and, as such, evil? Is it possible, perhaps, that Yuniór, narrating from a future standpoint after his masculinity changes through Oscar’s influence, has come to view the hyper-masculine *machismo* as evil?

Although Yuniór seems allied to Trujillo’s conqueror-of-women reputation, he is also influenced by Oscar’s determination with women in a non-violent manner. Still, Oscar’s weaknesses include everything that Yuniór strives against—obesity, emotional instability, sincerity, a serious nature, and virginity. Yuniór combats each of these actively by working out obsessively, hitting on girls, refusing to show emotions even to Oscar, and being generally competitive. He is not satisfied to have lost his virginity; instead he must sleep around and cheat on women, even those he genuinely cares for. Lola seems to have given him his first real respect for women, and in an attempt to get in her good graces, Yuniór agrees to live with Oscar. Not

only does Yunion pity Oscar, but he also takes on the responsibility of making Oscar masculine after being publicly embarrassed for cheating on his girlfriend and being unable to focus on chasing women for the moment. They work out together, eat together, and Yunion advises Oscar on girls. Yunion's emphasis is clearly on landing Oscar a girl so he can be redeemed by performing a good deed; he says, "Did I try to help him with his girl situation? Share some of my playerly wisdom? / Of course I did. Problem was, when it came to the mujeres, my roommate was like no one on the planet" (173). Yunion's perspective lends to the interpretation of Oscar as hopeless with women, yet Oscar is not entirely as unskilled as Yunion would have readers believe.

When Oscar meets Jenni, a girl Yunion describes as essentially the hottest girl in school, he does not embarrass himself or her, but rather they become close friends. Yunion is first not able to understand how their friendship is possible and later jealous: "Did it kill me that he was spending time with such a fly bitch? Of course it did" (184). Oscar, although still fat and considered a loser, is intriguing to Yunion because he is able to talk to a girl that rejected Yunion himself. Yunion notes that when he walks in on Jenni and Oscar talking, they were discussing Alice Walker, as if the mundanity of the conversation was more shocking than if he had walked in on Oscar flirting with Jenni overtly.

Oscar has other masculine traits that Yunion admires besides determination and the ability to talk to women about non-sexual topics. Yunion is constantly describing how often and what Oscar writes about, although it is not immediately clear that Yunion is jealous. Yet, when Yunion describes their living situation, he brings up the fact that he read Oscar's books and even let Oscar read some of his own stories. Yunion says he "Picked up his writings, five books to date, and tried to read some. ...even I could tell he had chops. Could write dialogue, crack snappy

exposition, keep the narrative moving,” showing his respect for Oscar’s style even though he did not like the content (173). Readers can understand the importance of this interchange because Yuniór is ‘writing’ this story as narrator, and feels that Oscar’s writings are important to ending the fukú. Writing, Oscar’s one true strength is a talent ascribed in the novel only to dictators and those who are in a position to oppose dictators. Yuniór says “What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? ...Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like,*” in a footnote (97). This note directly puts Oscar in a position of power equivalent with Trujillo, the most powerful figure in the novel, even though they are at opposite ends of the masculinity spectrum.

Oscar still succeeds in educating Yuniór, indirectly, in the responsibilities of manhood; after Oscar’s death, Yuniór claims that it is Oscar’s influence that encourages him to stop following the dictates of *el machismo* and finally settle down and get married. Although Oscar’s package containing all of his written works never arrives, Yuniór does find out that Oscar has finally lost his virginity. While this has been Yuniór’s focus throughout the novel, it seems anticlimactic and almost an afterthought in his writing. Instead, Yuniór is far more interested in discussing the ways in which he has changed for the better and is actively working to create a zafa, or counter spell for the fukú. Yuniór settles down with a wife he “doesn’t deserve,” teaches creative writing, and says “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, anew man, a new man” (326). Yuniór goes on to describe his current relationship with Lola, who seems now to have clearly been his first love. When describing her daughter, Yuniór says, “Could have been my daughter if I’d been smart; if I’d been ——” (329). The reader is left to guess what Yuniór meant to put in the blank,

but it seems likely that the phrase that fits there is “a man.” If Yuniór had been a man, in the way that Oscar was, he would have tried to figure out why he repeatedly cheated on Lola, even when he knew mentally that he did not want to.

Oscar’s more subtle form of masculinity ultimately allows for Yuniór to reach a new understanding of his Dominicanness through the history of *machismo* in his culture and through his ability, finally, to overcome its influence on him. The inclusion of both hyper-masculinity and non-masculinity, and the exchange between the two allows readers to reject the Dominican version of *machismo* as either all good or all evil in favor of a comprehensive understanding of the idea. In her study, Asencia notes that many scholars worry that *machismo* has become a catch-all term for Latin American masculinity without definition or acceptance of the possible beneficial aspects (108-109).

In the case of Díaz’s *Oscar Wao*, the characters learn, through the struggle of opposing masculinities, that the line between protector and predator is a tough line to walk. Oscar, seen as harmless throughout the novel, actually turns out to have major power rivaling even that of Trujillo. While he is sometimes seen as a predator in his obsession and stalking of his love interests, his intentions are pure. Trujillo is a predator in the worst way, hunting down women to satisfy his sexual urges, yet he is also depicted through conquering language as a protector of the female Dominican Republic. Yuniór, although he appears to be a foil to Oscar’s emasculated characteristics, is really a blend of Oscar and Trujillo. He is able to have and provide for a family, even after he has been excessively promiscuous. He is a writer, so he has real power, but he also teaches writing, thereby giving some of the power away. Díaz insists, through the multiple roles of each male character within the world of the novel as both protector and predator, that *machismo* is a superpower that, depending who wields it, can be good, bad or both.

## Works Cited

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