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# "Deceptive Intimacy": Narration and Machismo in the Works of Junot Díaz

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“Deceptive Intimacy”: Narration and Machismo in the Works of Junot Díaz

University of Tennessee

Department of English

Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

As one of the leading voices in contemporary fiction Junot Díaz has received unprecedented acclaim for the strides he has made in representing the invisible, challenging the conventional, and tackling today's social issues with equal parts aggression and finesse. Díaz rose to fame in 1997 when he published *Drown*, a short-story collection that details a young Dominican's coming of age with an unrefined yet striking truthfulness that readers immediately found irresistible. Five years later he released his celebrated novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, securing himself the Pulitzer Prize and renown as a master of detailing the immigrant experience. In 2013 he returned to short stories with *This is How You Lose Her*, where he revisits both the characters and the issues presented in his former collection. Throughout these works Díaz treads through topics of poverty, immigration, racism, and complex romantic relationships through the lives of Latino males living in New Jersey. And though Díaz's writing serves as a trusted agent for social justice, he did not reach this level of influence through crafting flawless, straightforward exposés of the problems plaguing our world. Ironically, the efficacy of Díaz's authorship is rooted in the contradictory, limited, and inconsistent nature of his storytelling. To celebrate Díaz is really to acknowledge the power of his imperfect narrator and fault-ridden protagonist, Yunior de las Casas. The most succinct yet accurate way to describe Yunior comes on the first page of *This is How You Lose Her*, as he tells audiences, "I'm like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good" (3). Yunior is a street-wise, drug-dealing Dominican immigrant who loves his mother yet horribly mistreats other the other women in his life. His storytelling is vulgar and electrifying, repellant and sparse, but most importantly riddled with inconsistencies. Díaz channels his most pertinent critiques of contemporary society through Yunior's subjective perspective, imparting truth and moral advice through a conduit that

is never dully allegorical. The damaged essence of Yunion allows Díaz to mingle entertainment and exposition in a manner that is poignant, overpowering and infuriating all at once.

Though Díaz tackles an array of topics through his works, this exploration will center on his dissection of machismo. The *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* defines machismo as “a culturally defined attribute associated with US Mexican and other Latino men [...] [having] a number of negative connotations, such as a chauvinistic and tyrannical male character, an exaggerated masculine posture, extramarital sexual activity, involvement in physical abuse and violence, and displays of physical courage or daring” (Valdez). Yunion serves as the “machista” in Díaz’s works by personifying these qualities in both his behavior and narration. And though there are countless sources that one could utilize to gain understanding about the qualities and consequences of machismo, there is an intimacy to Yunion illuminates these issues with stunning clarity. In interview with Henry Ace Knight for *Asymptote Journal*, Díaz says:

“The more granular a description is, the more likely people are to be able to use it as a way to connect [...] I think that any of us who read know that particularity is in many ways the wellspring of cathexis.[...] A song that’s just a bunch of vague obscurities—well, that attracts some people—but I think a lot of people love it when a song has a sharp, human, confessional specificity.” (Díaz, interview, February 10 2016)

This idea of “sharp, human, confessional specificity” is precisely why Díaz’s dismantling of hyper-masculinity has secured him as one of the most influential and distinguished social critics of our time. Díaz invites readers to walk with Yunion from child to teenager to adult, all the while revealing his tragic unmet wishes, receiving and doling out of abuse, struggles with poverty and racism, losses, and triumphs. He creates a character that readers can pity one moment, loathe the next, and all the while eagerly crave to understand. The conflicting reader

responses that Díaz provokes attest to the complex emotional, environmental, and cultural forces that act upon a machismo individual.

Though there are nineteen stories that comprise the collections, this thesis will center on seven of the stories that map Yuniór's development of machismo. The first chapter will outline three stories from Yuniór's childhood, wherein Díaz charts Yuniór's gradual acquisition of the hyper-masculine qualities that will structure the rest of his life. From his brother Rafa and father Ramon, Yuniór witnesses and consequentially internalizes the practices of objectifying women, masking vulnerability, cheating, and remedying deep-felt emotions with violence. These masculine codes that are embedded during Yuniór's childhood come to light in the second chapter which focuses in on Yuniór's teenage years. As Yuniór narrates these stories with silences and exaggerations, Díaz artfully renders the mask of masculinity that Yuniór is compelled to wear for his audiences. The third chapter will center around Díaz's two most tragic stories, as Yuniór is confronted with emotions of loss that threaten to collapse the rigid machismo infrastructure that has structured his life. This thesis argues that all of these stories serve a unique purpose in illuminating not only Yuniór's masking, but also the way in which his proclivity to act as a machista is passed down and exacerbated by the greater culture he was born into. In an interview with Michele Figate for *Politico New York*, Díaz attests that the book "attempts to, with a certain kind of savage honesty, represent a very specific male experience while simultaneously neither celebrating it nor rewarding it [...] you see the absolute damage that [hyper-masculinity] does to this guy, to men in general" (interview, Díaz, September 12 2012). By crafting a protagonist who is both the damaged and the one inflicting damage on others, Díaz confronts audiences with an unexpected challenge to understand the complexities of machismo rather than simply criticize it. In other words, it is not so easy for readers to point a

disapproving finger at Yuniór once we see his actions and in a larger context of his family, his intolerant community, and deeply rooted habits. This holistic perspective allows Díaz to unhinge hyper-masculinity in a manner that does not simply shame the men who practice it. Rather, Yuniór's vivid complexity allows Díaz to address this social issue with understanding rather than condescension, providing a solution rather than a hateful admonishment.

## Chapter One: Embedding the Machista Code in Childhood

In order to trace Yuniór's entrance into manhood, readers must first identify and come to understand his two primary models of masculinity: his brother and his father. Díaz opens *Drown* with the stories "Ysrael" and "Fiesta, 1980," which both serve to introduce readers to the machismo scripts that Yuniór is born and bred into following. Though the first story takes place in Dominican Republic and features a much younger Yuniór than the preteen American version readers witness in "Fiesta, 1980," these two stories function as a unit in setting up the backdrop for Yuniór's turbulent and cruel upbringing. Both stories take place over the course of one day and describe an event in which Yuniór functions as a bystander, submissively watching his brother and father abuse and humiliate weaker victims. And though the occurrences in the stories are specific and irreplicable, Díaz brilliantly utilizes these singular experiences to introduce readers in to the greater themes of violence, cheating, and exploiting others' weaknesses that reverberate throughout Yuniór's life.

Díaz's opening pages of "Ysrael", the collection's first story, are severe, frank, and almost stunning in their portrayal of two emergent Dominican boys who are operating far beyond their years. When the story opens, Yuniór and Rafa have been sent to live with their uncles in the campo while their mother works long hours at the chocolate factory. Díaz quickly establishes Rafa as Yuniór's stand-in mentor and guide to manhood while their father Ramón is away in distant America. At the very onset of the book, Díaz wastes no time destroying the notion that childhood is a time of innocence. As the pair finds themselves burdened by chores and poor living conditions, Rafa seeks to bring hope to their situation with dreams of sexual conquest, asserting "when I get home, I'm going to go crazy – chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else's" (4). Díaz begins to construct his character through these brazen musings.

Primarily, we see how important it is for Rafa to establish his virility in the eyes of others.

Through this passage Díaz introduces performative aspect of machismo behavior that will run throughout the rest of Yuniór's life and narration. In this instance, Rafa is performing for Yuniór in the present, yet mapping out how he will perform for others in the future.

In the following pages, Díaz builds Yuniór's character to be highly impressionable and eager to act as the audience for Rafa's showmanship. He narrates, "Later, while we were in bed listening to the rats on the zinc roof he might tell me what he'd done" (6). Through the details of the rats and zinc roof, Díaz exposes the shoddy and vulnerable atmosphere in which Yuniór is growing into adulthood. Díaz establishes these features of Yuniór's environment early in the text because they set the stage for Yuniór's rutted road to manhood. Yuniór's growing sense of what it means to be a man is singlehandedly influenced by an immature and impoverished preteen, Rafa, who is far from qualified to inform Yuniór's moral and emotional development. Yuniór goes on to describe his brother, "He was handsome and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. I was too young to understand most of what he said, but I listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future" (6). This snapshot provides perhaps the sharpest image of Yuniór as the audience to his brother's performance in all of *Drown*. In this moment Díaz encompasses the crux of Yuniór's role as the viewer – he is young and lacking discernment yet absorbs information readily assuming it is imperative to his journey to manhood.

In the following page of the same story, Díaz continues to describe this viewer-performer relationship through the brothers' journey to uncover Ysrael, a boy in the neighboring town who was attacked by a pig as a baby and now wears a mask to cover his mutilated face. Though Díaz could have written about boys embarking on any sort of journey, this quest is significant in that they are seeking to prey on the feebleness of one of their male peers. Though the boys begin the

day with the equivalent levels of excitement, as they draw closer to Ysrael, Díaz highlights the chasm in the two boys' appetite for violence and dominance. Yuniór begins the day narrating "I kept expecting Rafa to send me home and the longer he went without speaking, the more excited I became. Twice I put my hands over my mouth to stop from laughing" (9). Yuniór's laughter indicates that he views this experience as an adventure, a chance to unearth something captivating and extraordinary. Rafa's impetus to see Ysrael, however, is rooted in a far more sinister emotion – a craving to torment and bring shame to a fellow male. John Riofrio attests to Rafa's fascination in his critical essay "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy and Emasculation in Junot Díaz's *Drown*": "In their world, weakness, disfigurement, and non-conformity are all vulnerabilities which are to be exploited and castigated" (31).

Through this moment of laughter Díaz also emphasizes that Yuniór's enjoyment is rooted in his brother's inclusion and acceptance. For perhaps the first time in his life, Rafa has invited him into the performance and he will act as a co-actor rather than a viewer as the pair seeks out Ysrael. As Yuniór covers his mouth Díaz reveals that Yuniór is learning the importance of concealing delight, an emotion deviant from the cruel nature of the day, so as to preserve Rafa's acceptance. Riofrio explains Yuniór's actions, "Masculinity depends on a kind of self-policing among its members. Freedom of expression, whether through body language or verbal and emotional communication, is scrutinized to a degree which then transforms the adolescent male into a well-trained subject 'unconsciously' aware of the 'natural' rules of masculinity" (26).

Though the day starts with Yuniór's ability to censor his stereotypically feminine emotions, he begins to lose the ability to self-police as the excursion becomes more demanding. After he starts to cry, Rafa vehemently asserts, "You, he said, are a pussy [...] What the hell's the matter with you? [...] If you can't stop crying I'll leave you" (13). Through Rafa's threats, Díaz reveals that

Rafa perceives his brother's weakness as an abnormality and discomfiture. Yuniór's crying is not necessarily an annoyance to Rafa, but rather a danger to the strength their performance as they encounter Ysrael.

The structure of "Ysrael" is intentionally crafted by Díaz to reveal the contentious yet desperate need Yuniór feels to learn from Rafa's performance. The story begins with Rafa delivering verbal lessons and continues with field training for his little brother. Rafa instructs Yuniór on many mendacious tasks, such as how to trade in stolen Coke bottles for coins and ride the bus without paying. As the boys find Ysrael and the mission comes to a climax, readers begin to appreciate the strident contrast between the two brothers, and how deeply troublesome it is for Yuniór to place his faith in Rafa's teachings. When the brothers encounter Ysrael flying a kite and ask where he got it, Ysrael responds that his father sent it to him from New York. Yuniór responds, "No shit! Our father's there too!" and goes on to narrate, "I looked at Rafa, who, for an instant frowned. Our father only sent us letters and an occasional shirt or pair of jeans at Christmas" (16). In this instant, Díaz strips the characters of all pretense; they are simply three fatherless boys who are impoverished, abandoned, and tender. Whereas Yuniór humanizes Ysrael in this moment through their shared fatherlessness, Rafa hastily erases his frown and retorts, "Why the hell are you wearing that mask for anyway?" (16). As Rafa remedies his sorrow with hostility, Díaz features the machismo response to combat pain and insecurity with dominance. As Yuniór begins to talk about wrestling with Ysrael, it seems as if a friendship is blossoming between them. Moments later Yuniór narrates, "The mask twitched. I realized he was smiling and then my brother brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head" (18). In one single sentence, Ysrael's smiling activates Rafa to induce pain. Díaz further drives a wedge between the two brothers by depicting them as foils to one another: Yuniór as the

friend and Rafa as the tormentor. As the boys are heading home, Yuniór remarks, “Ysraél will be OK,” then describes Rafa’s response: “A muscle fluttered between his jawbone and his ear. Yuniór, he said tiredly. They ain’t going to do shit to him” (19). Through their experience with Ysraél, Díaz characterizes the two brothers in a stereotypically gendered split. Yuniór emerges soft, empathetic, vulnerable, and naive. Rafa’s response, however, is characterized by realism, toughness, and brutality.

Díaz’s positioning of this story as the reader’s first introduction to Yuniór is highly purposeful and effective. Not only does it serve to style the impecunious and hateful world in which Yuniór is growing up, but also elucidates the hazardous forces that are wounding and reformatting his character. As Rafa performs violence while Yuniór steadily gazes upon him, Díaz invites readers to understand the dangers of Yuniór’s malleability. This introductory tale showcases Yuniór not simply captivated by Rafa’s machismo, but learning to mirror it in order to gain inclusion with his brother and among the greater culture of machistas. Dominican psychologist Antonia de Moya further explains that “this process of self-affirmation, the need to prove one’s masculinity beyond mere biology, is by no means a product of adulthood. Rather, the process of demonstrating one’s merits for inclusion [...] begins succinctly in childhood where [...] the stakes are just as high” (25). In fact, it’s arguable that Díaz represents this experience with Ysraél not merely a stepping stone along the path to machismo, but a one-time induction into that society. In his book *Reading Junot Díaz*, Christopher Gonzales notes, “The Coke bottle smashed over Ysraél’s head operates like some terrible enlightenment for Yuniór [...] The world is not a place where the deserving always triumph. It is a world ever poised to blindside you. This stunning revelation announces Yuniór’s entrance into manhood” (17). In this way, the first story of *Drown* functions as both Yuniór and the reader’s initiation into a world of

brutality, and primes both parties to experience the consequences of hyper-masculinity that will unfold in the following stories.

It's no coincidence that Díaz places the next story in the collection, "Fiesta, 1980" immediately following "Ysrael." The story takes place a few years later, after the family has moved to America and Yuniór's father, Ramón, has reassumed his role as the man of the house. Much like the first story, "Fiesta, 1980" features Yuniór swept up in immoral behavior that he is powerless to stop, though this time it is hiding Ramón's affair rather than tormenting a defenseless boy. With the onset of this new force of masculinity Díaz expands and complicates the reader's understanding of the masculine pressures molding Yuniór. Whereas Rafa's expression of machismo was flagrantly violent and performative, Papi's behavior seems to slowly imbue Yuniór with damaging notions of what it means to be a man. The first glimpse that Díaz delivers of Papi is his return from cheating on Yuniór's mother – an introduction that immediately ushers readers in to the irreproachable status of Ramón as the head of the house. Yuniór narrates, "He didn't say nothing to nobody, not even moms. He just pushed past her, held up his hand when she tried to talk to him and headed right into the shower. Rafa gave me the look and I gave it right back to him; we both knew Papi had been with that Puerto Rican woman he had been seeing and wanted to wash off the evidence quick" (23). In this fleeting glimpse, Díaz exposes a multitude of descriptions of Yuniór's home life. Díaz renders Ramón physically prevailing and emotionally careless, while simultaneously presenting Yuniór's mother as a voiceless figure. Most notably, however, is that the boys are fully aware, even expectant, of their father's dishonesty. Rafa and Yuniór's knowing glance at one another suggests that all three men in the household are "in" on a longstanding act of deceit – a privilege not afforded to their

mother. Remarkably, however, this not an alliance of male conduct that Yuniór has elected to take part in. As a frightened son, his silence is an act of obedience rather than choice.

Though the affair bubbles under the surface of the story, the explicit conflict in “Fiesta, 1980” is Yuniór’s tendency to vomit when riding in his father’s Volkswagen. In many ways, Yuniór’s carsickness functions to represent the nausea and fear he experiences due to his father’s cheating. In the same way that Ramón forces Yuniór to contain the secret of the affair, he expects his son to suppress his sickness, though it is beyond his control. Díaz introduces readers to the struggle between father and son in the pair’s first moments together, as Ramón pulls Yuniór up by his ear and threatens him about throwing up in the car. Yuniór reacts, “I won’t, I cried, tears in my eyes, more out of reflex than pain” (26). Here Díaz represents both the unfairness of Ramón’s demands and deeply-rooted terror that Yuniór feels in the wake of his anger. Once at the party, Yuniór’s thoughts meander erratically between memories of the rides his father takes him on to “cure” him of sickness, pictures of his mother before she married, imaginings of his father being publically caught cheating, and recollections of dinners spent with the Puerto Rican woman. The manner in which Díaz jumbles all of these experiences works to symbolize the upsetting concoction of emotions that Yuniór is enduring, an internal mixture much like vomit. At one point in the night he declares, “Suddenly I wanted to go over and hug [Mami], for no other reason than I loved her...” (42). Much like his budding friendship with Ysrael, Díaz depicts Yuniór momentarily sympathizing with the victim of this story. These passing glimpses into the kindhearted nature of Yuniór highlight the injuries that Rafa and Ramón impose on his character through their hyper-masculine pressures. As Yuniór throws up in car ride home, Díaz underscores the way in which Yuniór is suffering at the hands of unstoppable forces, both emotionally and literally. Though he cares deeply for his mother, he is

powerless to combat the machista forces informing his maturation, much like one must give way to vomiting.

In this way, Díaz portrays Yuniór with his hands tied behind his back while deception and dishonesty creep into his behavior. Yuniór later describes his father's affair: "Me and Rafa, we didn't talk much about the Puerto Rican woman. When we ate dinner at her house [...] we still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary [...] 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" (39-40). By making his sons privy to his cheating, Ramón gives them no choice but to live in emotional dishonesty, forcing them to hide the truth from their mother and numb themselves to the pain of their broken household. Consequentially, Yuniór adopts dangerous behaviors such as masking adverse feelings and diminishing the value of truth. These conventions come into focus when Yuniór's aunt asks him if everything is alright in their apartment. Yuniór tells audiences, "I knew an interrogation when I heard one, no matter how sugar-coated it was. I didn't say anything. Don't get me wrong, I loved my tia, but something told me to keep my mouth shut" (39). Readers can infer that the "something" that invites Yuniór to keep quiet is the practiced habit of lying that Ramón has instilled in his son. Yet, perhaps the most dangerous feature of Ramón's affair is how untroubled and nonchalant he is about it. Though at this point in the narrative it's unclear how this indifference will impact Yuniór, the disregard for loyalty that he learns from his father will come to destroy him in later stories. This preview of Yuniór and his aunt chronicles the first of many lies Yuniór effortlessly tells women. Thus, in the same way that Yuniór learns about violence and theft from Rafa in "Ysrael," Díaz represents Yuniór absorbing and implementing Ramón's values of deception and detachment in this story.

Though “Ysrael” and “Fiesta, 1980” both feature the masculine training that Yuniór endures under the guidance of his brother and father, understanding his growth into a man is incomplete without analyzing his mother’s effect in “Aguantando.” These three stories, each concerned with the relationship between Yuniór and one of his family members, work as a triad to reveal the complex forces that encircle him as the youngest son. Though Díaz places “Aguantando” fourth in the collection, it is the youngest version of Yuniór readers witness in *Drown*. The story chronicles the family waiting in abject poverty for Ramón to come back and bring them to America. With Ramón physically removed from their lives, Yuniór struggles desperately to build a father figure based on incomplete scraps of information he gathers from his mother. Riofrio describes this experience, “The absence of the father figure and the perpetual reality of abandonment which accompanies this absence oblige the generation of fatherless boys to construct their own vision of masculinity based on [...] the hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind” (26). Acknowledging this burden to construct masculinity helps explain moments in the story that feature Yuniór building his version of an “ideal man” based around his father. The story opens with Yuniór describing a photograph of Ramón: “He was dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips. His dark unsmiling eyes were my own” (70). This photograph features common staples of manhood that fester in Yuniór’s mind: fighting, smoking, and lack of emotion. Later in the story, Díaz reveals how desperately Yuniór clings to vestiges of his father: “I am told that I wanted to see his picture almost every day [...] When [Mami] 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 and turned heads on the street” (83). Through this passage Díaz reveals not only the profound anguish Yuniór experiences as a result of his fatherlessness, but also his insatiable need

to know and experience his father. Because Ramón is inaccessible, however, Yuniór must build his version of masculinity based upon insubstantial remnants, an undertaking with much room for error.

Ramón's absence also shapes Yuniór's masculinity in that it colors his relationship with his mother, which leads to a negative perception of femininity in general. Yuniór's upbringing is characterized by parasites, leaky roofs, and vermin; yet the hope that Ramón will remedy these pains hovers in the air around their poverty. And while Yuniór acknowledges that his mother works twelve hour shifts at the chocolate factory, the implication is that under her provision they are merely surviving, but Ramón will rescue them from despair. After all, the name of the story derives from the Spanish verb "aguantar" which means "to endure." Riofrio describes the role of a mother in a fatherless home: "Femininity functions as a symbolic border. The adolescent, fatherless boys go about crafting their masculine identities via their interaction with, and interactions against all that is feminine" (29). Although Yuniór's tone describing Mami is pleasant and even admiring, it's evident that even as a young boy he is aware of her position as the discarded, waiting wife. The pain that Ramón's absence inflicts upon Mami also works to influence Yuniór's perception of women being feeble and passive. Yuniór describes his mother's agony after Ramón fails to come get them on the day he promised: "When Papi's name was mentioned her eyes dimmed and when his name left, the darkness of her ojos returned and she could laugh, a small personal thunder that cleared the air" (84). Through readers can assume that Yuniór is retelling this story as an adult, the minute details that comprise this description reveal that as a young boy he is able to understand the depths of his mother's heartache. Bearing in mind Riofrio's claim that boys craft masculine identities against femininity, it makes sense that Yuniór reacts to his mother's pain by asserting, "I still had baseball and my brother. I still had

trees to climb and lizards to tear apart” (84). Yunior’s nod to these stereotypically boyish activities reveal the ways in which he contests his mother’s deep-felt emotions with masculinity. Though right now the violence is docile, these modes of defense against femininity will be aggravated as Yunior grows into a teen machista. In many ways Díaz suggests that Yunior associates poverty and weakness with the years spent with his mother, while Papi symbolizes a distant but approaching power. Though these conceptions are shattered once Yunior comes to know his father, one can imagine how operating under this belief for the first nine years of his life would leave permanent biases and misconceptions regarding gender.

In the last passage of “Aguantando” Díaz delivers the final glimpse of Yunior as a child in all of *Drown*, before readers see him applying all of the hyper-masculine behaviors he has gleaned in the opening stories. The last paragraph, with its imaginings of Ramón’s return to Santo Domingo, forms an illustrative and critical conclusion to understanding the machismo infecting Yunior’s childhood for multiple reasons. The first is the discrepancy between Rafa and Yunior’s imaginings of his arrival. Rafa pictures Ramón appearing in the night, tall, confident, and driving a German car, whereas Yunior’s visualization is characterized by a deeper connection. Yunior describes his father at first not recognizing him, but later, “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” (88). This contrast reveals that while Rafa looks forward to the status and virility of a father figure, Yunior yearns to be known and loved. Gonzalez explains this moment, “All mean machismo vanishes, as it were, and all that is left is the pure, rarefied affection of a father for his youngest son – a son who carries his name” (27). What is most poignant about this passage, however, is the realization that Yunior never talks about Ramón’s actual homecoming despite the

numerous pages dedicated to describing the years leading up to it. Based on Ramón's character in "Fiesta, 1980" readers can assume that his return marked disappointment for Yuniór, a disillusionment that undoubtedly hardened him. By concluding the stories of Yuniór's childhood with this passage, Díaz gives readers one final look into his trusting, anticipative, and loving nature before it is tarnished by machismo in his teenage years. Díaz invites readers to fondly say goodbye to this version of Yuniór, all the while knowing that this moment of tenderness with his father will never occur.

Though the three stories of Yuniór's childhood span across multiple years and multiple environments, they work in tandem to capture the rocky pathway that comprises Yuniór's maturation. By introducing the collection with the influences that shape Yuniór's sense of what it means to be a man, Díaz provides readers with a view into the origin of Yuniór's constricted emotional range in later stories. As Díaz portrays him befriendng Ysrael, caring for his mother, and imagining a heartfelt reunion with his father, readers perceive his innate disposition toward deep-felt emotion. The genius of Díaz's writing, however, lies in the way that Yuniór's tender feelings are too frequently met with the expectation to mask and suppress such vulnerabilities. Judith Butler describes performance masculinity: "Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways [...] so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler 526). This metaphor serves to summarize Yuniór's adolescence as he grows and develops within the punitive boundaries set by Rafa and Ramón. Yuniór's expressions of sensitivity are quickly punished, while deception, violence, and apathy are celebrated. As Yuniór is innocently swept up in the raging tide of hyper-

masculinity that circles his life, Díaz successfully exposes machismo as an unstoppable force, a route to manhood with imminent consequences.

## Chapter Two: Analysis of Machismo-Influenced Narration

Pinpointing the moments early in *Drown* wherein Yunior begins to learn and apply hyper-masculine qualities acts as a springboard to understanding the psychological and emotional repercussions of machismo that Díaz presents in the later stories. And though the events of *Drown* do not move in chronological order, it's undeniable that Díaz structures the collection to showcase Yunior's erratic and volatile nosedive into becoming a machista. Díaz's writing, however, does not simply show the arc of Yunior's hyper-masculine development. By telling the story through Yunior himself, Díaz focuses not solely on what the story is, but *how* the story is told. Narration and identity are inextricably woven together in Díaz's works, as Yunior's storytelling shifts and reforms directly alongside his maturation. Yunior opens his story when he is nine years old, innocently absorbing lude sexual advice from his twelve-year-old brother – a pivotal starting point of Yunior's development as both man and narrator. He recounts with candor, "I was too young to understand most of what he said, but I listened to him anyways" (6). As the stories of "Ysreal," "Fiesta, 1980" and "Aguantando" unfold, audiences come to know Yunior as an honest, vulnerable, and emotional storyteller. He bares all to his audience about the pain of his father's abuse, his hunger and loneliness, his discomfort with violence, and even reveals his visualizations of a happier life despite the risk of appearing as foolish and naive. With lines such as "I still wanted [my father] to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives" he willingly invites readers to witness the futility of his youthful affection (27). He also offers frank and unflattering descriptions of his poverty: "I can't remember how many times I crouched over the latrine, my teeth clenched, watching long gray parasites slide out from between my legs" (72). In the later stories of the collection, Díaz departs from the childlike perceptions and family parties

of Yuniór's youth and roughly ushers audiences into spaces of domestic violence, drug dealing, homosexuality, and abuse. And though abuse runs throughout the stories from childhood, Yuniór's sensitive attitude toward violence shifts to apathy in adulthood. Díaz's manipulation of narration presents the hardening and concealing Yuniór undergoes as he steps into the role of a machista.

Through crafting an inconsistent voice, Díaz hastens the power of a subjective narrator to complicate and enrich the message of the work. In many ways there are three perspectives that inform the storytelling of *Drown*. There is Yuniór the narrator who has been charged with telling his story, Yuniór the character who transfers this story through a filter of hyper-masculinity, and finally Díaz who mingles the truth and deceit to reveal the harmful outcomes of machismo. More specifically, this complicated trio affords Díaz the ability to showcase problems with Yuniór's rationale without explicitly announcing his shortcomings. In fact, often the most groundbreaking truths that spill from the stories of *Drown* are not written on the page but found in the space between what the narrator says and what the reader knows to be true. As Yuniór recounts moments with exaggerations, inconsistencies, and silences Díaz elucidates the ways in which machista culture inhibits Yuniór from naturally experiencing emotions. In an interview with Hilton Als from *Upstairs at the Strand*, Díaz describes his narrator, "I wanted to write about deceivers, people who were wearing masks" (Díaz, conversation, March 18 2016). It becomes clear that as Yuniór reflects back on memories he is masking emotions not solely for audiences and the other characters in the book – he is masking them from himself. Yuniór's mask is both an external façade and internal blockade from experiencing the richness of emotions such as heartbreak, loss, and love. In this way Díaz invites readers to comprehend the consequences of

abiding by masculine codes, and even pity Yunior's blindness to the ways that machismo is corrupting his life.

Both stories that will be discussed in this chapter center around Yunior's engagement with romantic or sexual relationships. These stories are immensely effective in coming to know the character of Yunior because, in many ways, he steps into his machista identity by working against intimacy. Because the delicate emotions that comprise his relationships act a threat to his manliness, he consistently engages these experiences with resistance, deceit, and exaggerated toughness. Additionally, Díaz uses narration to showcase Yunior's insistence on maintaining a mask for both his community in the story and the audience to which he tells the story. As he grapples with the challenges of romance his narration oscillates between briefly unveiling his sensitive interior, then hastily reestablishing his toughened veneer of machismo. Though the narrator in "Aurora" is not Yunior himself, Díaz writes through a Dominican-male who embodies the spirit of Yunior. Gonzales affirms this idea, "a given story need not explicitly announce the narrator's identity for it to be about Yunior [...] there is a thread that binds all of the stories into a whole. Indeed, there is no question that Yunior is the dominant element of the entire book" (31). Thus, in order to maintain clarity and cohesion I will refer to the narrator of this story as Yunior.

As the third story in the collection, the placement of "Aurora" emphasizes the stark contrast between Yunior the boy and Yunior the man. If the first two stories in the collection portray young Yunior being inculcated with hyper-masculine practices, this story unapologetically spotlights him putting these concepts into action as an adult. As Yunior opens the story, "Earlier today me and Cut drove down to the South River and bought some more smoke," Díaz wrenches readers from Yunior's family life into the drug-ridden streets of New

Jersey (47). Years have passed since the opening stories, introducing a Yuniór who prowls the streets as an illustrious dealer, gets high with his partner Cut, and abuses his on-and-off-again girlfriend. The story's namesake is Aurora, a seventeen-year-old heroin addict who has just been released from juvenile detention. As Yuniór dissects their relationship through violent flashbacks, filthy snapshots of their sexual encounters, and confessions of abuse, Díaz lucidly depicts the horrors that machismo has wrought in their relationship and the way it suppresses any hope for progress.

Yuniór immediately introduces his audience to Aurora by admitting that he's thinking about her and eagerly waiting for her to show up at his apartment. It's significant that Díaz delivers the first description of her as the most affectionate in the story; after this moment Yuniór seems to backtrack as if he is embarrassed by his initial confession of caring for her. From this point on, he erratically pulls and pushes the reader in clashing directions as he describes their relationship. One moment he goes looking for her at the Hacienda, a drug flop house, the next he wants to "put a fist in her face" after they have sex there (55). Often Yuniór even refutes himself within a single sentence. He admits, "I know that I should probably dis her for being away so long [...] but I take her hand and kiss it" (48). Christopher Koy describes this regression: "The pattern of 'Aurora,' like many of Díaz's stories, is one of qualification or potential cancellation of what has earlier been claimed by the unreliable narrator of the story, a process of working backward from the accepted or assumed knowledge towards contradiction and uncertainty" (77). Though his love for Aurora is genuine, his conflicting feelings of disgust, obsession, guilt, and desire cause him to vacillate impetuously throughout his storytelling. Yuniór narrates as both the abuser and protector, the pursuer and the one trying to flee. His tone reflects this split as he describes Aurora kissing "the parts of my face that almost never get touched" with heightened

emotional language, then juxtaposes these details with a blunt snapshot of punching her chest “black-and-blue” (53). Here Díaz demonstrates that the danger of machismo is not solely rooted in the way it triggers misogyny, cheating, and abuse. Rather, Yunior’s contradictory narrative voice allows Díaz to feature the ways in which hyper-masculine codes frustrate one’s ability to rationalize and stabilize sensations of love. Though Yunior’s words are formidable, the inconsistencies in his narration invite readers perceive him as tormented and even pitiable as he grapples with emotion. Díaz grants readers the power to see behind Yunior’s mask, revealing the damages of machismo that Yunior himself is blind to.

Another unique narrative quality in “Aurora” is that though Yunior sets out to tell a love story, he dedicates a nearly equal amount of effort into detailing his job as a drug dealer. Though one might argue that this is a necessary step to understanding his addictive relationship with Aurora, there are moments in the story in which Yunior seems to only talk about drug dealing to boast in front of his audience and establish his manliness. Often Yunior places particularly successful and authoritative accounts of himself as a dealer directly after expressing weakness. For instance, after sleeping with Aurora and waking up to find his pockets emptied he says, “We all do shit like this, stuff that’s no good for you. You do it and there’s no feeling positive about it afterwards” (50). This unusually honest and self-aware admittance is immediately met with the section “A Working Day” in which Yunior portrays his street-wise and dangerous dealer persona. He announces, “We work all hours of the day and when Cut goes to see his girl I keep at it, prowling up and down Westminster, saying wassup to everybody. I’m good for solo work. I’m edgy [...] You should have seen me in school. Olvídate” (52). Through this boastful narration Díaz invites audiences to perceive the duality of Yunior – both his private shame and outwardly confident mask. His flagrant tone is also reminiscent of Rafa’s bragging in the

opening pages of *Drown*; it's clear that Yunior is performing for readers in the same way his older brother once performed for him. Yunior also takes care to illustrate his hard-hitting reputation in the eyes of community, a tactic to counteract the weakness he exhibits with Aurora. He describes a night at the corner, "I'm cool with everybody and when folks show up they always give me a pound, knock their shoulder into mine, ask me how it's been" (57). Yunior's insistence in showcasing his popularity indicate that Yunior performs masculinity not only as a character, but also as a narrator. Though this technique Díaz implies that though Yunior is capable of delving into sensible emotions, he consistently feels the need to reestablish his toughness for audiences. As scholar Paravisini-Gebert points out "The narrative often emphasizes the masks these characters must assume and maintain, to the point that maintaining the mask assumes the centrality of life and experience – a protection against life and living (170). Yunior's masking and unmasking affirms his need to constantly preserve and defend his status as a machista, both on the streets and throughout his storytelling.

Though Yunior begins his account of Aurora with a distinct starting point (her return from juvie) he ends his story without providing any sense of resolution or closure for readers. The final scene is particularly melancholic as Yunior illuminates the love and violence that coexist within his relationship with Aurora. The couple lays on a sheet as she draws images of a home and children on the walls of an abandoned apartment. He opens the scene, "You know how it is when you get back with somebody you've loved. It felt better than it ever was, better than it ever could be again" (64). This is the only instance in the story that Yunior admits to loving Aurora; his passion ushers audiences into this final scene with a sense that the story will end hopefully for the couple. This possibility is quickly and aggressively crushed, however, as Díaz jerks readers from Aurora's wholesome fantasies into the couple's dire reality. Yunior's

compulsion to protect his manhood lead him to perceive Aurora's hopes as both threatening and infuriating. He narrates "She ran her nails over my side. A week from then she would be asking me again, begging actually, telling me all the good things we'd do and after a while I hit her and made the blood come out of her ear like a worm but right then, in that apartment, we seemed like normal folks" (65). This run-on sentence, crammed with both care and abuse, summarizes the viciously unpredictable way that Yuniór interacts with love. Though he doesn't admit to it, Yuniór hits Aurora in an attempt to suppress and control her yearning for stability and support. Koy remarks, "The mask of machismo is never eliminated or replaced by love, for machismo remains [Yuniór's] only protection in the concatenation of adventures within this dangerous environment and imperious machismo must be maintained" (78). Reading through this lens allows readers to understand Yuniór's proclivity towards violence as means of preserving his manhood, though he fails to realize this. In this sense his callous narration permits readers to understand Yuniór in a way that Yuniór cannot understand himself. In the previously mentioned interview with Als, Díaz remarks "Most of us try everything we can to manage our fears and our insecurities. Most of us are profoundly inhuman to ourselves and other people" (Díaz). It's evident that Díaz writes through Yuniór's voice to expose his audiences to a man who is desperately and unhealthy "managing" his anxieties. Readers perceive the repercussions of hyper-masculinity in clear focus, while Yuniór struggles aimlessly to reconcile his desire for companionship within machista confines.

In many ways the story "Drown" mirrors the structure of "Aurora" in that Yuniór explains his troubled relationship with an important life figure through flashbacks, all the while straddling the line between distance and affection. This story focuses in on his relationship with Beto, a long-time friend who slowly invites Yuniór to explore homosexuality in the shadows of

his basement. Yuniór employs many of the narrative tactics he uses in “Aurora” to justly tell a story without appearing weak to his audience. He narrates with the same rancorous tone, outlines his illegal activities, and contours the story so that moments of emasculation are immediately followed with fierce bravado. Yuniór introduces audiences to Beto: “He’s a pato now but two years ago we were friends and he would walk into the apartment without knocking, his heavy voice rousing my mother from the Spanish of her room and drawing me up from the basement” (91). Much like his narration surrounding Aurora, Yuniór couples his fond memories with chauvinistic language in an attempt to safeguard his masculinity. Because Yuniór is about to tell audiences about his hidden exploration of homosexuality he is certain to first establish his toughness, insisting, “We were raging then, crazy the way we stole, broke windows, the way we pissed on people’s steps then challenged them to come outside and stop us” (91). Through these opening statements Díaz once again enforces the performative nature of Yuniór’s narration. Because he is about to divulge an experience that casts him in a weakened light, his opening pages are wrought with hyper-masculinity.

One aspect of narration that distinguishes this story for “Aurora,” however, is Díaz’s use of tense shifts and narrative time. Though Yuniór shifts between past and present as he reflects upon Aurora, there is a sense that the troubles surrounding the couple are immediate and on-going. Yuniór and Beto, however, have experienced years of silence since the dissemblance of their friendship, evinced by Yuniór’s assertion as he looks for Beto: “I can go back to dinner and two years will become three” (92). This fissure in time affords Yuniór the opportunity to exaggerate the distance between himself now and when the events of the story occurred. For instance, though the story’s purpose is to describe his homosexual encounters of the past, ironically one of the only depictions Yuniór gives of his present life is intensely homophobic. He

describes a night out with his friends, passing the “fag bar” where “Patos are all over the parking lot, drinking and talking [...] When somebody comes over from the bar he’ll point his plastic pistol at him, just to see if they’ll run or shit their pants [...] Fuck you! He shouts then settles back into his seat, laughing” (103). Once again, it’s clear that Díaz includes this hateful snapshot in Yuniór’s narration to evince his tendency to temper vulnerable truths with exhibitions of hyper-masculinity. The narrative structure of the story also demonstrates Yuniór’s need to overstate the distance between the present and his sexual moments with Beto. Though the narrative spans sixteen pages, he spends the first twelve describing his hard-bitten neighborhood, criminal behavior, and heteronormative friendship with Beto before the incident. Gonzalez notes, “From section to section he juxtaposes the narrator of the present – the narrator who has cut himself off from his best friend when he discovers his friend is gay – to the younger version of the narrator *before* he and Beto become partners” (45). Yuniór’s language and tone surrounding the pool is an excellent example of this split. While young and in high school, Yuniór recounts, “We lunged from the boards and swam out of the deep end, wrestling and farting around” (92). A few lines later Díaz flashes forward to the same pool in the present, as adult Yuniór shifts to severe language, “Fuck me, I say. I’m not the oldest motherfucker in the place, but it’s close. I take off my shirt and knife in” (93). Though revisiting the principal setting in the story, Díaz highlights Yuniór’s departure from a lighthearted teen to a profane, calloused adult. Yuniór dedicates the bulk of the story to the “before and after” without ever landing on the central event of the story. The manner in which Yuniór skirts around the truth until the very last moment is reminiscent of a child admitting to wrongdoing – he is clearly shameful of his tremendous sin against masculinity and conflicted about his desire to see Beto again.

After detailing his estranged relationship with Beto, Yunior finally begins to recount the events that ended their friendship. From the start Yunior's narrative tone shifts from confident to defensive, as he qualifies the experience "Twice. That's it" (104). Whereas in "Aurora" Yunior wound irregularly through violence and lust on a fractured timeline, he conveys his dealings with Beto chronologically and succinctly. As Yunior rushes through the homosexual encounters in a brief two pages, he leaves out crucial details yet inflates his sense of remorse and confusion. After the first afternoon, Yunior reflects "Mostly I stayed down in the basement, terrified that I would end up abnormal, a fucking pato..." (104). Statements such as this and the opening line ("Twice. That's it.") evoke the sense that Yunior is telling this story with embarrassment and self-loathing. Dorothy Stringer asserts "Sexual shame and homophobia, particularly the immediate, unremarkable homophobia of quotidian homosociality, institutionalize self-hate and self-doubt" (119). Both hate and doubt are clearly present in Yunior's narration, as he angrily slips in "a fucking pato" after the first afternoon and then defends his confusion throughout the second night. He describes his state of being after Beto touches him, "I wasn't asleep or awake, but caught somewhere in between, rocked slowly back and forth the way surf holds junk against the shore, rolling it over and over" (105). Here Díaz creatively exhibits that Yunior's interaction with homosexuality is not repellant, but bewildering. This brief interruption in the harshly heteronormative flow of Yunior's life is a moment that he cannot clearly outline for readers because it is incomprehensible, even though years have gone by. In his essay, "Subjectivity, Difference and Commonalities in the Context of Gender in the Caribbean" C. Jama Adams asserts, "Healthy psychic development requires the commitment of considerable emotional and cognitive resources to manage the noticeable tensions between what is often promoted as normative gender behavior and what is psychologically healthy" (10). This statement aids in

making sense of Yunior's self-doubt and self-hate; he has found himself wedged in the tension between what is deemed "normal" and "queer" in his society and does not possess the rationality to remove his mask and untangle his emotions. Once again, Díaz invites readers to grasp the shortcomings that Yunior himself is blind to.

As he ends the section with a thoughtless "Fuck this," Díaz portrays Yunior fiercely exiting the experience and leaving Beto for good. Perhaps the grandest breach in narration in "Drown" is Yunior's silence surrounding the loss of his best friend. Notably, what would appear to readers as a dramatic unraveling of a friendship seems expected and unproblematic to Yunior. This tone of nonchalance is evident through Yunior's account of Beto's parting gift: "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" (107). Yunior's masking of concern regarding the erasure of such a prominent figure in his life exposes the ways in which heteronormativity confines his emotionality. In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Judith Butler notes, "As a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences [...] indeed those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522). This idea of punishment for breaking the rules clarifies why Yunior's narration is void of any recount of hurt, regret, or unrest as he loses Beto. He perceives his involvement with Beto a crime against his masculinity and cutting ties with him as the natural consequence. Gonzales sharpens this idea of the limits that machismo places on emotion, affirming, "Cultural codes and vigorous anti-gay sentiment drown the close friendship and perhaps love that Beto and the narrator shared. The sexual exploration of these two teens [...] should not have ended the close friendship [...] It highlights the kind of situations in which a man resorts to scripted 'how-to' instructions to guide him rather than allowing his emotions to

dictate his actions” (46). The end of “Drown” hastens one of the most startling narrative moments in the text as Yunior halts his recollection of with Beto without any mention of hope, grief, or reconciliation. Díaz incites readers to feel more concerned than Yunior is – an ironic position that irradiates Yunior’s constricted range of emotions and weighty fetters to the rules of hyper-masculinity.

“Aurora” and “Drown” are two stories that represent relationships that are tarnished and lost by Yunior’s insistence in abiding by the machista regulations he internalizes as a child. Through the characters of Aurora and Beto, Díaz spotlights the companionship that is available to Yunior if he could only shed his violent, heteronormative, deceitful, and performative tendencies. Gonzales notes, “Whether it is a failing of character or an inability to break through the expectations of community, [Yunior] is unable to find what [he] most desires: a substantive, lasting, meaningful relationship with the one he loves” (47). The brilliance in Díaz’s writing, however, is that Yunior’s impediments which are obvious to readers are unseen by the storyteller himself. In the interview with Als, Díaz describes Yunior as “a big liar” who “filters the whole thing” and is “so not about the truth” (Díaz). Yet in the same interview he remarks upon the voice that runs through his stories, describing a “horrifying deceptive intimacy that I need to tell my stories. There has to be this voice, there has to be a presence in the book that wants to tell the truth” (Díaz). This tension between a yearning to relay truth and Yunior’s compulsion to screen it forms a groundbreaking exposition of the masking and performing that machista codes demand. Readers can simultaneously see the truth and observe Yunior cloaking it with exaggerations, silences, and inconsistencies. The deep-felt emotions that Yunior is unable to express bleed through the pages despite his attempts to confine them, and Díaz effectively

captures a “deceptive intimacy” that is both distressing and demonstrative of the costs of hyper-masculinity.

### Chapter Three: The Disintegration of Machismo

After analyzing Yunior's acquisition of machismo in childhood and noting the way these practices inform his narration as a teen, this final chapter completes Yunior's development by tracing how the mask eventually falls away. While *Drown* Díaz portrays Yunior deflecting emotionality, *This is How You Lose Her* presents the ways in which these tendencies serve to deteriorate his life in the end. And while Díaz presents clear consequences of abiding by machista codes in "Aurora" and "Drown" – namely confusion, abusive relationships, and the loss of friendship – his next collection illustrates a more costly and irredeemable representations of loss. As Yunior's brother dies of cancer in "The Pura Principle" and his fiancé leaves him in "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Díaz portrays the ways in which the pain of these events is instigated and exacerbated by Yunior's hyper-masculine tendencies. These stories work as the grand finale to Yunior's many seasons of constricting emotionality, a heart-wrenching but predictable end as readers have viewed his growing callousness through the years. "The Pura Principle" depicts Yunior absconding from his troubled situation and running instead toward his timeworn succor of silence, drugs, and denial. The loss that opposes him in the final story, however, is less concrete than the death of his brother and is therefore not as easily evaded. Yunior wades through multiple abstract losses in "The Cheater's Guide to Love." He surrenders not simply his relationship, but also his ability to captivate and seduce women, control over his crumbling body, the respect of his friends and students, and most significantly, the capacity to supersede these troubles with machismo. Once again, though Díaz's arranging of the stories may appear random, he delivers a definite beginning and end to Yunior's arc of development. In the first story of *Drown*, Díaz presents nine-year-old Yunior internalizing violent practices and quickly learning shrug off friendship and exploit other people. As the stories wind through

Yunior's life, the chronological placement is not as important as marking the machista lessons and tactics he acquires through the years. The byproducts of these accumulating experiences culminate in "The Cheater's Guide to Love" as thirty-year-old Yunior's life begins to crumble because of his corrupted emotionality. As the strategies that once protected him backfire, Díaz presents machismo as the ultimate handicap of his life.

Though its arguable that none of the stories Yunior tells are happy, "The Pura Principle" and "The Cheater's Guide to Love" are undoubtedly the most agonizing vistas into Yunior's life that Díaz provides. They center on two great tragedies of Yunior's life – the loss of his brother and the loss of his fiancé – and are thus ripe with moments that reveal noteworthy responses to emotional hardships. The first story chronicles Rafa's last few weeks before dying of cancer at age nineteen. Unequipped to face feelings of grief and regret, Yunior detaches himself from his brother's illness rather than appreciating the value of his final days. He opens the story, "No way of wrapping it pretty or pretending otherwise: Rafa was dying. By then it was only me and Mami taking care of him and we didn't know what the fuck to do, what the fuck to say. So we just said nothing" (91). While the topic of his brother's premature death ought to inspire narrative that is more transparent and mournful than the other stories, Yunior carries on with the same calculated bravado typical of his character. Perhaps cancer's greatest affront to the de las Casas family in the way it fractures the rigid hyper-masculinity structure that has guided and protected them for years. Rafa's body, which has secured him as the sexual and physically violent force to be reckoned with in the family, deteriorates and he becomes weaker than Yunior and even their mother. Additionally, the silence that has always protected them begins to fester and breeds fear, misunderstanding, and even hate. Gonzales summarizes this upheaval: "Cancer compels Rafa to be vulnerable, to allow his mother to take care of him, [...] to start showing his brother love

before he runs out of time. But Rafa has never been taught how to acknowledge and handle his emotions. His uncertainty, and Yuniór's as well, comes from lack of emotional preparedness" (102). As the brothers avoid coming to terms with Rafa's encroaching death, Díaz presents the grand culmination of an upbringing fostered by violence, deceit, and performative masculinity.

Another essential element to the framing this story is understanding the fraternal relationship at work. One might argue that Rafa's enduring dominance and cruelty towards his little brother does not merit a heartfelt goodbye. While this may be true, it's undeniable that Rafa's departure from the family is worthy of recognition and closure. Even though Yuniór rarely describes Rafa in endearing terms, Díaz peppers brief moments of their commiseration and companionship throughout the texts. In "Aguantando," Yuniór remembers reuniting with his brother after a summer apart: "Rafa smiling, slapping me on the shoulder, darker than I'd last seen him. How ya doing, Yuniór? You miss me or what? I'd sit next to him and he'd put his arm around me" (77). Rafa serves as Yuniór's lifelong comrade, sharing in his poverty, the absence of their father, and disorienting immigration to the United States. Acknowledging the hardships that befell the pair in childhood serves to augment the irreverence of their parting and underscore the way in which each brother's hyper-masculinity is part and parcel of the other.

Although machismo runs steadily throughout both texts, Díaz utilizes this story to present the most unforgivable and multi-layered consequences of machismo for a couple of reasons. First, the finality of Rafa's death magnifies a moment in which Yuniór's behavior cannot be redeemed or undone. Unlike his mistreatment of women or unraveling friendship with Beto, there is no hope for restoration once Rafa is gone. The machista barricades that have protected Yuniór from love and tenderness since childhood are not softened by imminent loss; if anything, Yuniór bolsters these walls as his brother dies. He distracts himself with drugs, recalling, "I was

seventeen and a half, smoking so much bud that if I remembered an hour from any one of those days it would have been a lot” (93). Through Yuniór’s strong-willed insistence on carrying on as usual, Díaz suggests that the script he has been following since childhood is impenetrable and unchangeable even to a hefty force like death. It is unclear whether or not Yuniór ever comprehends the magnitude of his final days with Rafa; if he does, he chooses not to express his regret with his audience. Yet, there is one fleeting glimpse of remorse in the story “Flaca,” after Rafa has died, wherein Yuniór describes his insomnia: “I figured this staying up meant something. Maybe it was *loss* or *love* or some other word we say when it’s too fucking late” (88). Though he narrates this in the context of a woman, Yuniór calls upon a familiarity with regret to inform his frustration. Out of all of Yuniór’s misdeeds, Díaz represents his fleeing from fraternal love as the most hopeless and permanent. He fashions Rafa’s death spiral with the same silence, dishonesty, and physical abuse that has characterized the brothers’ entire lives, unapologetically robbing readers of any sense of reconciliation.

Another aspect of this story that serves to illuminate the complexity and danger of machismo is way in which Díaz represents two men, rather than one, operating under machista codes. While early stories in *Drown* feature both Rafa and Yuniór engaging in hyper-masculine practices, the young boys’ actions are largely surface level and supercilious. This story features a more insidiously concealed side effect of machismo as “the emotional vacuum in their lives prevents any sort of honest communication” (Gonzales 102). Díaz departs from demonstrating the form machismo that is vulgar, loud, and violent. The concern is no longer what is said, but what is silenced. Yuniór describes their lack of communication: “I sat with him sometimes when the Mets were playing, and he wouldn’t say a word about how he was feeling, what he was expecting to happen. It was only when he was in bed, dizzy or nauseous, that I’d hear him

groaning: What the hell is happening? What do I do? What do I do?” (98). In an unconventional way, each man continues to challenge and prick the hyper-masculinity of the other, yet the competition is now measured by who can better avoid the truth. Yuniór certainly refuses to talk about it, as he admits, “The few times my boys at school tried to bring it up, I told them to mind their own fucking business. To get out of my face” (93). Rafa also dodges reality: “But of all of us Rafa took the cake. When he’d come home from the hospital this second go-round, he fronted like nothing happened. Which was kinda nuts, considering that half the time he didn’t know where the fuck he was because of that the radiation had done to his brain” (95). It seems obvious to everyone besides the brothers themselves that Rafa and Yuniór are more connected in their sorrow and fear than they realize or can speak about. And as they flee from the devastating certainty of Rafa’s death, they run in opposite directions rather than side-by-side. Rafa latches onto a manipulative girlfriend while Yuniór begins “shrooming [his] ass off,” and the pair of brothers become farther divorced from one another as death draws nearer (120). In this way, “The Pura Principle” is unique in the way that Díaz depicts machismo not as a manifestation of brazen and domineering masculinity, but as a slinking agent of isolation.

Yet perhaps the greatest tragedy in “The Pura Principle” is the way that machismo does not simply isolate the pair but pits them against each other. In the final pages of the story, Díaz concludes the relationship of the brothers with the most transparently hateful act seen in either collection. While walking home from the grocery store one afternoon Yuniór gets hit by a Yale padlock. He narrates with striking detail, “[...] out of nowhere my face *exploded*. All the circuits in my brain went lights out” (120). Hours later Rafa chillingly admits to the crime: “Later, when Mami went to bed, he looked at me evenly: Didn’t I tell you I was going to fix you? Didn’t I? And then he laughed” (121). Díaz draws the curtain on the relationship between Rafa and Yuniór

after this haunting line, abruptly ending the chapter and Rafa's existence in Yunior's life. Díaz uses this final interaction to harden several truths about machismo. First, he highlights that machista codes are so deeply embedded in the men boys that even death does not excuse them from following the rules; even more, death seems to exacerbate them. He also juxtaposes Yunior's physical injury with the long-lasting injury that will follow the unresolved relationship between the two boys. While the welt on Yunior's face will eventually heal and return to normal, the masks that men refuse to take off have maimed their relationship past the point of repair. Finally, as vitriol between the brothers festers, Díaz shatters the notion that machismo is a force that pits men on the same team against women. Misogyny and sexism are prolific in the texts, yet it's significant to note that the most catastrophic and unredeemable relationship that Díaz features is between two men. The effectiveness of this story in illuminating truth springs from Díaz's obstruction of all the typical sentiments surrounding loss, such as sympathy, closure, reflection, and healing. Instead, he busts both Yunior's face and any hopes for a heartfelt goodbye, forcefully opening readers' eyes to the dire consequences of machismo.

The final story of *The is How You Lose Her* is in many ways also the finale of *Drown*, as Díaz writes a tale about all of Yunior's infidelity and deception catching up to him in end. The title "The Cheater's Guide to Love" makes an ironic and cheeky nod to the culmination of all of Yunior's experiences, as if he is a wizened specialist in cheating after all of these years. As Gonzales points out "this story is not just about dating. It's about *cheating*" (122). The story begins after his fiancé's growing suspicion of his dishonesty leads her to go through his emails. She finds that over the course of their relationship he has cheated with fifty other women. In many ways the uncovering of the emails marks "the day that was different" for Yunior's life story as he is ultimately presented with a challenge that he cannot overcome by overriding his

emotions with machismo. His exposure hastens a swift departure from the Yunion readers have come to know over the course of the previous eighteen stories. After his fiancé leaves him, he removes his mask of virility, trashes his narrative filter, and crumbles into a depression so heavy that it that cannot be concealed from audiences. Though Díaz has made it clear to readers that hyper-masculinity is a damaging and debilitating force in Yunion's life, this story marks the first time that Yunion himself seems to acknowledge the way it cripples him. As Yunion takes a lamenting, confessional approach to this "how to" story, Díaz continues to reveal nuanced and complex truths about the nature of machismo. Much like in "The Pura Principle" Díaz focuses in on a traumatic event to feature highly specific influences, motivations, and outcomes of machismo. Rather than addressing the topic of hyper-masculinity with an overarching allegory that condemns it, he seeks to craft a reading experience that engages the complexity of the issue and offers a viable solution.

One facet of the story that cultivates a dynamic expose of machismo is the subtle accents in the story that tie back to Yunion's past. More specifically, Díaz makes nods to patterns that are clearly derived from Yunion's childhood, his father's influence, and masculine strategies that have worked in previous stories. In this way he enforces that Yunion's cheating is less a momentary indulgence, and more a continuation of the machista rhythms that have reverberated throughout his life. In the opening pages of the story lies the most overt example of Díaz directing audiences towards the past, as Yunion narrates, "You blame your father. You blame your mother. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo" (180). By situating these lines in the beginning of the story, Díaz reintroduces the familial and environmental forces that may have been long-forgotten by readers since the opening stories of *Drown*. As for him blaming his mother and father, it's undeniable that Ramón's blasé attitude about his affair with Puerto

Rican woman, coupled with his mother's passive acceptance of the cheating, would certainly warp Yuniór's assessment of the acceptability of infidelity. In this quote Díaz also points to Dominican patriarchy, which is most clearly conveyed in the opening stories. For instance, during the party with all of the family's newly-immigrated relatives in "Fiesta, 1980" Yuniór states, "About two hours later the women laid out the food and like always nobody thanked them. It must be some Dominican tradition or something" (36). While Díaz is not suggesting that these influences expunge Yuniór's misdeeds, gesturing to them helps to illuminate Yuniór's cheating in a greater context. Yuniór was not born dishonest, nor was he brought up in an environment that celebrates respecting women; he is acting on the code that has been embedded in him since childhood. Díaz also writes of Yuniór's attempts to remedy his pain with other women to highlight repeated patterns from his adolescence. Yuniór narrates, "Of course you go back to smoking, to drinking [...] you run around with the sluts like it's the good old days, like nothing has happened" and later on "You want to turn over a new leaf. Takes you a bit – after all, old sluts are the hardest habit to ditch – but you finally break clear and when you do you feel lighter" (182, 186). Here Díaz paints the sexual conquest piece of hyper-masculinity in an addictive light. By placing sex alongside vices like drinking and smoking, Díaz demonstrates that virility is an anesthetic that Yuniór has relied upon to make himself feel better since he was a teenager. Like the previous example, Díaz is not implying that Yuniór is powerless to abandon these machista tendencies. He alludes to the past to depict how deeply implanted and intricate hyper-masculinity can be in a person, rather than generalizing the issue or admonishing men. Díaz could have simply written a critique of machismo that points out all of the qualities and consequences. He instead tackles the issue in a groundbreaking and preeminent way by placing

readers in a gray area where machismo is not simply “bad.” It is complicated, habitual, and passed down from man to man.

Though Yuniór’s breakup incites his depression and subsequent unmasking, Díaz does not tell this story to suggest that the solution to machismo is loving a woman. Instead, he juxtaposes transparency and deception throughout the text to point to honesty as the ultimate opposing force to hyper-masculinity. When the story opens, readers have spent the last two-hundred pages witnessing Yuniór deflecting emotionality and suppressing the truth both as a character and a narrator. Immediately readers perceive a drastic narrative shift in the way Yuniór willingly tears down the façade of masculine coolness he has always strived to protect. He opens the story by calling himself a “totally batshit cuero” (179). “Cuero” is Spanish slang for slut, indicating the first moment in either text wherein Yuniór describes sleeping around as a harmful pursuit rather than a triumph to boast about. Yuniór’s acceptance of deep-felt emotions spurs other expressions of honesty, such self-awareness, introspection, and vulnerability with his audience. He narrates with penetratingly expressive and poetic language: “During finals a depression rolls over you, so profound you doubt there is a name for it. It feels like you’re slowly being pinned apart, atom by atom” (183). Yuniór lets audiences in to his pain as well as his self-loathing, angrily spewing, “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” (216). Yet despite Yuniór’s truthful narration, the bulk of the story centers around both Yuniór and his best friend Elvis falling into traps of deception. As two past lovers falsely accuse the men of impregnating them to secure financial support, Díaz effectively flips the gender dynamic that renders women victimized by the lies of men. Yuniór enforces his growing connection to the baby: “[...] you allow yourself the indulgence of wondering what kind of child you will have.

Whether it will be a boy or a girl, smart or withdrawn. Like you or like her” (203). Later, when Yuniór finds out that he is not the father, he tells readers, “You didn’t think anything could hurt so bad” (205). Díaz does not incorporate the fabricated fatherhood aspect of the story to suggest a punishment for Yuniór or indicate bad karma. Rather, experiencing lying as a form of betrayal lays the groundwork for Yuniór to begin to acknowledge the consequences of deception, which serves as the great agent for change in his life. Díaz indicates that emotional honesty is the ultimate force to combat machismo because, at the core, hyper-masculinity is a wooden veneer, a smokescreen, and a fictional performance. After the master of trickery himself falls prey to duplicity, he begins to seek truth and untie his mask for good.

Through separated chronologically by many years, “The Pura Principle” and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” are tightly bound in the way that Díaz offers complicated and provocative reactions to the losses that confront Yuniór. The two stories work well as the final piece to this exploration because they incite a reader reaction to Yuniór that is not rooted in sympathy (like the first chapter outlining his childhood) or blame (such as the second chapter which showcases Yuniór sabotaging his chance for relationships with Aurora and Beto). Díaz artfully places readers somewhere in the middle of these extremes, making us keenly aware of Yuniór’s deliberate choices to avoid his dying brother and cheat on a woman that cares for him, yet also attentive to the ways in which these actions are programmed. Though Díaz has never sought to categorize Yuniór as the “bad guy” or the “good guy,” the substantial hardships in “The Pura Principle” and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” muddle his moral ambiguity further than ever before as Díaz mashes up physical handicaps and emotional infirmities, betrayal, fear, apology, terminal illness, and loss of identity. What makes Díaz’s presentation of machismo so stimulating, pertinent, and sought-after in today’s world is his emphasis on the imperfect,

complex humanity that is at the core of every hyper-masculine man. In the previously referenced interview with Knight, Díaz asserts, “[...] having communion with a person and their world and those flaws, those elisions, those lacunae [...] they only add verisimilitude and only add conviction to novels [...] There’s something about the imperfection of the human experience that I think finds an excellent interlocutor in the novel” (Díaz). Indeed, Díaz jumpstarts a multifaceted, authentic conversation about masculinity through the stunning intricacy of Yunior’s influences, shortcomings, and outcomes. The irregular cavities in Yunior’s story form the ideal space for readers to sit awhile, have “communion” with him, and consider the complex yet conquerable nature of machismo.

## Conclusion

All of Yunior's deception compounds in the final page of *This is How You Lose Her* as he finally opens the folder containing all of emails and photos of his cheating days. After reading through his offences, he sets out to confront his mask by telling his fragmented story – an endeavor that “feels like home, like grace – and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get” (217). Here, Díaz not only attests to the remedial power of writing, but how vulnerability and openness are the ultimate combating force to hyper-masculinity. Ending the collection with the story that inducts Yunior as a writer allows Díaz to close the gap between himself the author and Yunior the narrator. And while Díaz has called Yunior a “hypertonic distorted extension of me” for years, an article published recently by Díaz in April of 2018 in *The New Yorker* reveals the way in which the author and character are more connected than readers could have known.

In his article titled “The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma” Díaz recounts his own childhood rape and subsequent trauma with the same courage and eloquence that radiate from his short story collections. Díaz's account mirrors Yunior's struggles with remarkable precision. His confusion, detrimental remedies for pain, depression, suicidal thoughts, cheating, and most importantly, undying commitment to his mask, dynamically reflect his protagonist and affix the pair's suffering. His statement in *The New Yorker*, “I think about silence; I think about shame, I think about loneliness. I think about the hurt I caused. I think about all the years and all the life I lost to the hiding and to the fear and to the pain. The mask got more of me than I ever did” serves as a perfect summation of the consequences he seeks to expose through Yunior's life (Díaz, “The Silence” 16). Yet, the value in this article lies not in the ways he and Yunior are similar, but how they are different. In bearing the story of his rape for the world to

see Díaz heroically takes his own advice to combat machismo with honesty. In a sense, Díaz grabs the baton from where he left Yunion off in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” and completes the challenge of unmasking with stunning nerve, insight, and dedication to both his audience and his social justice objectives. In an interview with Capitol New York nearly six years ago, Díaz says:

“The idea is that the real home that you build in your world is a home of love. That is a home that is all about exposing yourself to vulnerability [...] it means that you feel comfortable and safe enough to drop all of your masks...also that you forgive in another person their flaws, because you’ve already encountered, embraced, forgiven your own flaws. And really I think as a human person—in my mind, I’ve always thought the final home of any human is in love” (interview, Díaz, September 12 2012).

Through the vulnerability Díaz harnesses in this recent article, the objective he proposes in this quote comes full circle. He does not simply employ a fictional character to showcase the way that intimacy and embracing human imperfection pave the way for a “home of love.” Díaz is selfless, even sacrificial, in the way he removes his mask. He forgives his flaws and welcomes us to forgive our own.

In the beginning of the article, Díaz reveals that the impetus behind talking about his rape was the need to answer his readers with honesty. Specifically, he attests, “We both could have used that truth [...] It could have saved me (and maybe you) from so much” (2). This idea of using truth as a saving grace, a buoy in tumultuous waters, and light to guide us as we grapple with the social issues of our time stands as the ultimate achievement of Junot Díaz. Through building the most intricate and deceitful of narrators, Díaz skillfully highlights the repercussions of machismo in a way that feels conquerable. He demonstrates that transparency and

vulnerability are the most formidable agents for justice. And above all, he walks us through Yunion's life to celebrate his intricate and imperfect humanity, calling us to revel openly and truthfully in our own. After all we are all "like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good."

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