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Machismo, Carnival, and the Decolonial Imagination  
in the Writings of Junot Díaz

Joshua Evans Price

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Machismo, Carnival, and the Decolonial Imagination in the Writings of Junot Díaz

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This work explores Junot Díaz as an author of decolonial imagination, and more specifically, how the carnivalesque nature of Dominican machismo as influenced by Trujillo's *el tiguere* masculinity creates liminal space for self-determination in opposition to colonial imagination. In exploring Díaz's primary masculine characters, Oscar de Leon and Yunior de Las Casas, I trace the initial decolonial turn engendered by *tigueraje* performance, namely its projective creation of self outside of colonial domination. *El tiguere* machismo as empowering for Dominican males, however, is problematized by its reciprocal domination of both women and men who fail to meet the *tigueraje* ideal. It becomes an attempted cure that is ultimately symptomatic of the extent to which the effects of insidious ideologies and political policies, in this case, imperialism, perpetuate themselves across time, space, and perhaps most significantly, cultures. Ultimately, identifying Junot Díaz as decolonial author is a misrepresentation; though Díaz writes to break free of coloniality, his failure to largely acknowledge in his writing the cost and damage done to Dominican women reveals a narrow focus antithetical to the larger goals of decoloniality.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, carnivalesque, machismo, colonialism, decolonial imagination, *el tiguere*

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## Introduction

The recent development of what scholars Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar call the “decolonial imagination” provides a significant lens through which the works of Junot Díaz can be reevaluated as acts of social and cultural criticism. The decolonial imagination envisions alternatives to the logics of colonialism by serving as “a space of contestation” in which “new political praxis and social movements are engendered” creating the possibility for decolonized futurities, futures free from colonial domination (9). The process thus constructs a liminal space for productive creativity that evaluates and challenges the colonization of the imaginary of the colonized. In doing so, the decolonial imagination frees the colonized from the domination of colonial ideology that has shaped and controlled self-perceptions, and it opens the possibility for the creative determination of self. Hanna, Vargas, and Saldívar argue that Díaz is “a forerunner in creating, articulating, and shaping the decolonial imagination in contemporary American literature” because his fiction challenges pervasive colonial ideologies that dominate the imaginary of colonized peoples (8).

Through this reevaluation of Díaz as an author of decolonial imagination, I argue that Díaz’s engagement with stereotypical Dominican masculine performance becomes an avenue for creative self-determination of identity. Creating their new identity, colonized Dominican American men challenge the tenets colonial difference established through Eurocentric domination. In doing so, I acknowledge the toxicity associated with machismo in Latino/a studies, particularly as it is manifest in the influence of a *trujillista* masculinity on Dominican masculine performance. Machismo in this *trujillista* sense stands in opposition to a decolonial imagination striving to conceptualize a society free of racialized hierarchies and patriarchal gender oppression. Indeed, it may be argued this machismo reinforces the underlying misogyny

of colonial logic. Of course, the domination of machismo expectations associated with *trujillista* masculinity provides its own set of hegemonic oppressions for both Dominican men who fail to meet the masculine ideal and those who embody its hyper-masculine performance. More troubling are the implications of colonial appropriations: in seeking self-identification, Dominican men colonize women.

I do not, therefore, seek to reclaim machismo as a fully redeemable system of masculinity. Rather, I wish to complicate established views of machismo by identifying how its performative nature—the donning of machista masks to meet expectations—reveals the carnivalesque qualities of Díaz’s primary male characters, Oscar de León and Yuniór de Las Casas. Díaz’s creation of carnivalesque characters in the Bakhtinian sense allows for a projective self-determination that rejects coloniality as the dominant shaping force of male Dominicaness. Specifically, these characters’ subversion of colonial hierarchies and grotesque realistic preoccupations provides a connection to basic human characteristics that cross culture, ethnicity, and religion which challenge the difference inherent to colonial binaries. In other words, Díaz’s use of carnivalesque characters emphasizes human similarities—what unites us as a species—rather than difference. More significantly, the carnival’s rejection of completeness in favor of a more fragmented, tentative state of becoming creates a liminal space conducive to self-discovery. Machismo's carnivalesque disassociation from colonial binaries thus enables Díaz to establish a liminal space for Dominican men to become agents of their own Dominicaness as rooted in decolonial subversion rather than colonial domination.

### *Trujillista* Masculinity and the Carnavalesque

No study of Dominicaness nor Dominican masculine performance can be undertaken without considering the omnipresent influence of General Rafael Trujillo. At first glance,

Trujillo came to power and ruled the Dominican Republic much as many other dictators have: a potent combination of taking advantage of disasters befalling the country and instigating fear in the citizenry through violent repression. Yet, to truly grasp the pervasiveness of Trujillo's power in the Dominican Republic, it is essential to consider what Lauren Derby describes as his seduction of the island nation through his adoption of performative masculinity stemming from *el tiguere*. Indeed, Trujillo's *el tiguere* persona became a cult of masculinity which came to define both Dominican nationalism and the performance of its men.

Derby identifies *el tiguere* as a “trickster who rises from poverty to a position of wealth and power, often through illicit means.” It represents a “hyper-masculine pose” that reflects the characteristics of mixed-race underclass Dominicans (174). In this way, *tigueraje* masculinity is one that transgresses social, racial, and economic borders, seizing power and reputation when no one bestows it, where its “otherness” does not belong. This power and reputation is gained through an extension of the “life style and...attitude that combine the extreme traits of masculinity [of] street culture” which include “slyness, courage, aggressiveness, indiscriminate sexual relations” (de Moya 114).

Trujillo's *tiguere* persona represents a creative imagining of Dominicanity that sets it apart from the colonial imagination of Dominican identity. Trujillo represented the outsider from the white elites both within and outside of the country. He was of *mestizo* origin and thus one of *la gente*, the people. His social movement through his own cunning and especially his conquest of socially elite women simultaneously echoed *mestizo* ideals while rejecting elite expectation. Indeed, through his cultivated image of presidential power as *tigueraje* masculinity forged by bravado and sexual aggression, he subverted the constraints of the previous liberal model of respectability within the presidency established by classist and racist regimes. Further, he broke

free of the dominant colonial ideology that subordinated the colonized to the colonizer by virtue of the latter's inherent cultural and racial superiority. In essence, his performative masculinity became a reclamation of Dominican identity from the Eurocentric and Americanized elites and re-created it in the image of *la gente*.

Sexual conquest is the mode and method of this re-creation. Sexual aggression plays a role in his upward mobility by allowing him to defy the aristocracy—and imperialist power—and symbolically triumph over them by stealing their daughters.<sup>1</sup> It provides a legitimacy to his claimed power by allowing him to accumulate women to claim status. Indeed, *tigueraje* logic argues the more important the woman subordinated, the bigger the man (Webb 257-58). This culture of sexual conquest, of course, can be identified as a problematic reflection of imperialist ideology and the very political practices that began and continue to perpetuate colonial domination. Maja Horn argues that Dominican notions of race and masculinity were largely shaped by the imperialist ideologies of the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose civilizing mission was undertaken to civilize peoples who were “racially inferior and inherently less manly” (25). Imperialism, then, becomes instruction in supposedly superior US masculinity. She further links Trujillo's masculine power over the country to the influence of occupying US Marines: “Trujillo's role as the country's patriarch, supreme macho, and virile savior was legitimized and naturalized by the widespread sense that the Dominican Republic had been feminized and emasculated by the outside forces' domination and the curtailing of the country's sovereignty” (35). In this light, Trujillo's hyper-sexuality as a method of

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<sup>1</sup> Portifino Rubirosa's conquests of American elite such as Hollywood star Kim Novak and Heiress Barbara Sutton were viewed by Trujillo as triumphs that legitimized and aggrandized the Dominican Republic. Trujillo's adoption of Sutton as a Dominican citizen after her marriage to Rubirosa becomes a literal representation of victory through sexual conquest (See Derby, pp. 182-83).

aggrandizement seems an adoption and adaptation of colonial methods of ideological domination.

While it is necessary to acknowledge the influence of US colonialism on the development of *trujillista* masculinity, Horn fails to recognize the role *el tiguere* plays in Dominican historical heritage. The term *tiguere* first emerges in association with the profitable and illegal maritime economy largely run by freed slaves turned privateers—La Tiguere was the name of a French privateer vessel in 1762 (Peabody 15). Derby identifies the social category *el tiguere* of the twentieth century with “Creole of the sixteenth, the freed slave of the seventeenth, and the mulatto of the eighteenth” all social categories, she argues that are “figures of difference that threatened social hierarchy through their status as strangers who had more latitude for social movement in the social order than everyone else” (188). *El tiguere*'s transgressive ability to cross boundaries defining race and class through his sexual conquest of white, elite women becomes a direct affront to colonial boundaries. He is, therefore, a mythic hero whose aggressive masculinity directly challenged colonial domination.

When in consideration of its *tigueraje* foundation, Trujillo's dominant sexuality, though perhaps enabled by the US, is not merely a reflection of US imperialism. Rather, it becomes a symbol of his Dominicaness. Trujillo recognized the inherent power of *el tiguere* to reclaim and reshape Dominican autonomy and in doing so, reclaim Dominican identity. His seizure of power after a prolonged period of American occupation and control over the judiciary courts—acts viewed by Dominicans as an assault on their masculinity and a symbolic emasculation—was viewed as “restorative of the country's honor, and thus masculine agency” (Derby 62, 174). Christian Krohn-Hansen argues that through Trujillo's adoption of the *tigueraje* persona this masculine agency provided a “shared language for constructions of power and legitimacy among

Dominicans” (108). This shared language, built upon the *tiguere* folk hero enabled the *mestizo* to identify with the regime (Alonso 42).

His dominant sexuality, so celebrated by the *mestizo* Dominican lower and middle classes, reveals Trujillo as one of *la gente* ruling according to their values. As such, it gives legitimacy to Dominicaness as recreated by *tigueraje* performance and represents a subversion of colonial hierarchies that define colonized identity as inferior while allowing for a decolonial imagining of self within Dominican culture. Essential to this re-creation of Dominicaness is the performative nature of *tigueraje* masculinity. Machismo in the *trujillista* sense is not inherent to Dominican performance; it is a performative mask to be donned. Yet to understand culture-shaping implications of the Dominican mask, it is necessary to consider it through two dated though still relevant lenses that identify machismo’s creative role in the self-determination of Dominicaness: namely, the contradictory views of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival mask and Octavio Paz’s cultural mask.

For Bakhtin, the mask in its carnivalesque form—the mask of folk grotesque—is “connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, . . . rejects conformity to oneself,” and is related to transition and “metamorphoses” (39-40). The wearers of the carnival mask are in a process of change; they reject the unified self and celebrate the incomplete. This connection to change and possibility links the mask to the decolonial imagination: it presents an opportunity for alternative logics to colonial domination.

Whereas Bakhtin’s mask is one of creative possibility, Paz views the mask as defensive separation. Though Paz speaks specifically of Mexicans and their culture, the similar histories of imperial incursions within both Mexico and the Dominican Republic provide a parallel need for the adoption of cultural masks. Paz argues that the cultural mask of the Mexican male serves as a

“wall of indifference and remoteness between reality” and the individual but also between the individual and self (29). It is a defense established as a reaction to historical imperialism that while partly created due to feelings of inferiority is more profoundly created due to a recognition of difference.

Monika Renard and Karen Eastwood caution that this type of adoption of cultural masks rather than providing individuals with a sense of identity proscribes them with expectations (503-04). This idea describes both Paz’s description of the Mexican mask and the Dominican adoption of machista masks. In a very real sense, Paz’s Mexican mask hides the individual behind an expectational mask that comes to define the individual by the collective. Yet, this approaches the idea of cultural masks from a colonial perspective. Considering the Dominican position—they are a colonized group—the machista mask represents an act of reclamation, a voice given to the silenced. Indeed, it becomes an active choice of identity. This choice possesses a dual nature: it both actively subverts colonial hierarchies and revels in the grotesque realism of sexual promiscuity, a trait celebrated in *el tíguere*, an essential part of Dominican masculine identity. This recognition of the machista mask as both an active choice of identity—the Bakhtinian view—and a method of concealment—Paz’s view—reveals its dual nature within Dominican society; it both creates and defends male Dominicaness.

The creative faculty of the machista mask simultaneously reveals its carnivalesque nature and connects it to the decolonial imagination. However, to recognize the importance of the carnivalesque for understanding the projective possibility of machismo as represented by the machista mask—the mask being a symbol of the carnival—it is necessary to briefly consider Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival “celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order...[and] marked the

suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (10). He notes that it was a temporary moment in which rank and class were ignored, where “a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (10). The carnivalesque, then, is concerned with power and more specifically with the subversion of hierarchies through the degradation of high culture.

Central to this degradation were the ritual spectacles. These spectacles were characterized by grotesque realism, a folk humor that removes the ideal, the religious from the realms of the abstract. In doing so, grotesque realism connects the ideal to the material, specifically to the body, Bakhtin’s symbol of collective humanity. Grotesque realism in the carnivalesque sense represents the universal, what Bakhtin refers to as the “all-people’s element” (19); it deals with both the positive (birth and feast) and the negative (death and defecation). As such, its essential principle is degradation; degradation in the Bakhtinian sense is a coming down to earth, a primal connection—again the similarities connect humanity across cultures, ethnicities, etc.—to those elements—we all eat, sleep, defecate, and have sex—that make us human. Grotesque realism, therefore, is a method of the carnivalesque’s destabilizing influence against the image of completion characteristic of ideal society. Within grotesque realism, the body and thus the self, is in a constant state of change within the human collective; the notion of a complete self, of a finished identity, is antagonistic to transition. Thus, birth and death—transitory states—become the symbolic and essential states of the carnivalesque.

The transitory preoccupation of the carnivalesque is revealed in the duality of the Dominican machista mask. Chad M. Gasta’s description of the carnivalesque as an opportunity to don “costumes and masks customarily associated with carnival celebrations... to hide...true identities and become something else” (179) could just as easily describe the Dominican

assumption of *tigueraje* performance. The recreation of self as machista to subvert colonial imagination becomes a carnivalesque subversion.

Yet the transgressiveness and especially lasting influences of carnivalesque subversion have been challenged. Mark Gluckman and Victor Turner have criticized Bakhtin for ignoring the temporary nature of the carnival.<sup>2</sup> Rather than leading to legitimate social change, the carnival serves as a safety-valve that “release[s] social tensions and hence restore[s] social harmony” (Scott 177). The safety-valve theory ascribed to by many scholars argues that once the people are allowed moments of carnivalesque freedom they more willingly accept state domination. Or as Roger Sales puts it, carnivals allow authorities to “remove[] the stopper to stop the bottle from being smashed all together” (169). Carnivalesque freedom and subversion, then, potentially become an illusory state and ultimately serve to support and maintain the functionality of society. James C. Scott argues that if this were entirely the case, the social elites would have “encouraged the carnival...[while] the opposite was more nearly the case.” Both religious and secular institutions throughout history “have seen the carnival as a potential if not actual site of disorder and sedition that required constant surveillance” (178-79). While Scott acknowledges that these carnivals did not often lead to active rebellion, they nevertheless planted seeds in the minds of the oppressed. The social inversion inherent to the carnivalesque provided a context in which they could “[imagine both] a total reversal of the existing distribution of status and reward” and a “[negation] of existing social orders” (80-81).

It is in this idea of negation, of a world in chaos and transition, that the carnivalesque provides the possibility of projective creativity for self-creation. Key to this projective creativity is the idea of liminality. Victor Turner identifies the liminal state of being within rituals as one in

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<sup>2</sup> See Max Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*

which social expectations are lifted and the individual derives power from their position without the bonds of familiar structures. It is a state in which they have left a previous state of being but have not yet reached the next (108). Within the context of the carnival, Natalie Zemon Davis argues that the transitory nature of liminality provides a space in which individuals recognize their removal from societal expectations and therefore are enabled to act in a way unfeasible in their normal guises (181). It is a moment when new and alternative ideas can be considered and expressed. The idea of transition, of incompleteness, inherent to liminality perfectly identifies the opportunity for self-identification provided by the carnivalesque. The assertion that the carnival is illusory, that it merely satiates the oppressed, fails to recognize the process of re-creation begun within its context.

Initially, *tigueraje* machismo provides such a state of carnivalesque transition within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. It rejects the colonial hierarchy imposed on diasporic Dominicans that defines them as inferior as it figuratively emasculates them. Instead, *tigueraje* machismo provides both a space of sexual power without colonial domination and a liminal moment where alternative logics can be considered. Further, *tiguere* sexuality provides a grotesque realistic connection to the basic human similarities which rejects the demeaning of Dominican men within the colonial imagination. Yet, though the incompleteness of this liminal moment provides space for projective self-creation, the sexual empowerment seized during *tigueraje* performance becomes a troubling perpetuation of the horrors of imperial colonization; Dominican men in rejecting colonial domination through reclaiming their virility simultaneously enact hegemonic violence and control over women. Díaz's primary male characters, Oscar and Yunió, represent the problematic contradiction of machismo as both liberator and destroyer.

Ultimately, their abilities and, at times, inabilities to embrace the carnivalesque liminality of machista performance provides space to either reject or perpetuate colonial domination.

### Oscar, Yuniór, and Carnivalesque Masculinity

When Oscar is first introduced as a young child, he is the prototypical Dominican lover boy; he relentlessly pursues girls his age, his encounters with them characterized by attempted kisses and “giving them the pelvic pump” from behind during the merengue (*Oscar Wao* 11). These predatory interactions are immediately identified as the expectation for “normal” Dominican boys, a normative masculinity culturally reinforced by encouragement of family and friends and the examples of adults. He is favorably compared to Porfirio Rubirosa, Trujillo’s hand-picked face of his regime and thus of *tigueraje* masculinity,<sup>3</sup> by his mother, Beli, who refers to him as “that little macho” (14) and made to dance with girls at parties, “approximat[ing] the hip-motism of the adults” as they watched and laughed (12).

Yet as Oscar grows, his Dominican maleness wanes. He loses the aggressiveness characteristic of his youth, fails at athletics, and trades his boyhood cuteness for teenage acne and extra weight. His obsession with women and especially with sex, however, remains the same. Yuniór, while living with Oscar, realizes that he had “never met a kid who wanted a girl so fucking bad,” that “[t]o him they were the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega” (173). Yet despite this overwhelming desire, “a gravitational mass of love, fear, longing...and lust” which Oscar directs at every girl in his vicinity regardless of age or attractiveness and considers a “huge sputtering force,” his actual desire is ghost-like in its impotence; no woman notices it. Comparing this impotence to achieve sexual fulfillment with Yuniór’s sexual virility

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<sup>3</sup> See Lauren Derby, *The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* pp. 175-83.

simultaneously reflects the immigrant impotency inherent to colonial oppression and suggests a freedom of action that stems from machismo. As such, Oscar as a character comes to represent the failure to achieve the Dominican machismo ideal.

This is further suggested by Díaz's use of "parigüayo"— "the kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him"—to describe Oscar. This term is significant when considered in its historical context. It was used during the 1916-1924 US occupation of the Dominican Republic to describe Marines who attended Dominican parties only to sit at the edges of the dance floor and watch (20n5). By labelling Oscar's inability to meet the performative expectations of Dominican machismo as his parigüayeness, Díaz acknowledges Dominican masculinity as an antithesis to US colonialism, an act of Dominicanity outside of its control.

Oscar's failings mark his Dominicanity as suspect since sexual prowess becomes the defining characteristic of Dominican masculinity in the novel. "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (24). Dixia Ramírez identifies his failure to do so as an expansion of his alienation from Dominican culture, an alienation already acutely felt by diasporic Dominicans (395). Thus, Oscar is doubly othered: he is neither Dominican in his actions nor American in his origins. As such, he is defined by colonial logic—and to an extent Dominican expectation—as inauthentic and thus an eternal other in both cultures.

Unable to find space in either culture, Oscar embraces nerd-culture as a means of coping and self-definition. Yet he finds neither. Despite Díaz's apparent fondness and familiarity with nerd-culture—or perhaps because of it—he establishes Oscar's nerd identity as a reason for Oscar's failures as a Dominican male. Unlike Yuniór, who has similar nerdy interests but

recognizes that the way forward as a Dominican man is camouflaging his nerdiness with masculine performance, Oscar is unable to don the machismo mask to conceal his un-Dominican maleness, eliminating his chances with women and emphasizing his inability to fit the Dominican ideal. While Yuniór conspicuously consumes women, realizing expectations and reaffirming his machismo, Oscar consumes comics, drifting further from the expectations of his community. His commitment and passion for nerd-culture prevent him from fulfilling his longing for sex.

Díaz creates this competitive juxtaposition purposefully. Considering the preoccupation of Dominican machismo with sex, it becomes obvious that Oscar's desire for sex is not merely Díaz's representation of masculine teenage—and later adult—lust; it is his driving desire for a connection with his Dominicaness. Within the framework of the novel, sex represents belonging in his culture. Similarly, his love of nerd-culture reflects his desire for belonging within the US. Consider for instance, Oscar's tendency to retreat into the escapism provided by day dreams when his sexual designs are thwarted and when he falls into depression (which is often). These day dreams are characterized by the alien nature of the world he inhabits, often due to nuclear fallout. In it he is the hero, the one responsible for rebuilding civilization—with the Dominican women who rejected him in reality by his side. It is no stretch to recognize the alien worlds his daydreams inhabit as a sci-fi reflection of what the US is to an immigrant. That in his imagination these worlds are often ravaged leaving him to rebuild civilizations, then, becomes a desire for active creation of his identity within US culture. Indeed, in his desire for place within the US, he gravitates toward the very aspect of American culture that best defines his experience within the country as a diasporic Dominican. Yet the presence of the Dominican women and

their romantic attachments and reliance on him reveal this desire for self-identification remains connected to his inherited idea of Dominican masculinity.

It is significant, therefore, that in his quest for self, Oscar engages in an act of re-creation: he writes science fiction and fantasy novels. Yet this act of re-creation fails to provide the sense of empowerment, self-identification, and above all, sex that he desires: he writes and pursues publication but no one is interested. He falls into a deep depression due to his failures; he continues to dream about alien worlds, but rather than bringing the hope of new worlds to be rebuilt and civilized, they are revealed as “burned out ruins, each seething with new debilitating forms of radiation” (268). Despite the failure of nerd-culture to provide him with a sense of real belonging, Oscar continues to cling to it as his one chance for Americanization, a colonial promise of assimilation. Nerd-culture becomes the empty promise of the United States, the melting-pot ideology that never really existed for the “other.”

Oscar retreats to the Dominican Republic, the “home” where his inability to fulfill the machista ideal of Dominican maleness or speak the language has made him feel inauthentic. Ironically, his return trip to the home that had never accepted him lays the foundation for his reclamation of the Dominicaness of his youth by separating him from the locus of colonial imagination, namely direct US paternalism. In the absence of the overt oppression of colonial logic—though certainly still under its influence—defined by imperialism’s racial and social binaries, he experiences the beginnings of what Nelson Maldonado-Torres terms a decolonial turn. This decolonial turn is defined by Ramón Grosfoguel as a shift from the ideological domination of colonial imagination that defines modernity (219).

Yet initially, Oscar remains a disciple of the colonial domination. Having spent two weeks in the Dominican Republic with the underlying goal of finally losing his virginity to an

Island girl, he despairs his commitment to stay for the summer. Oscar identifies his inability to dance, lack of confidence, and appearance—all characteristics of a failed *tigueraje* masculinity—as separating him from achieving his sexual goals. More significantly, however, he argues that the fact that “he [isn’t] from Europe” contributes to his failures (*Oscar Wao* 279). As such, it becomes apparent that Oscar’s Dominicaness—which he and other Dominican men link to sexual prowess—is undercut by two competing systems of identity: machismo and colonial imagination, each system connected to the two great life obsessions of sex and nerd culture. Oscar’s ultimate decision to remain in the homeland in pursuit of sexual fulfillment, therefore, reveals a greater desire for a connection to Dominicaness rather than Americanness.

This decolonial turn is quickened by Oscar’s involvement with Ybón, a former prostitute who lives next door to his grandmother, La Inca, in two interrelated ways. First, it represents what Oscar sees as the “start of his real life” (279) which had up to this point been defined by his dual failures to achieve Dominican expectations of masculinity and connect with the US through nerd-culture. As such, his real life becomes a real Dominican life. The pursuit of the masculine ideal leaves no room for ties to coloniality; Oscar abandons his fantasy writing to spend time with Ybón. With this second sacrifice of colonial influences in his life—the first being his abandonment of the US for the Dominican Republic—he more fully commits to Dominican machismo and thus begins to recreate his image of himself, his Dominicaness, according to a decolonial imagination.

Yet the expectations of Dominican machismo do remain elusive for Oscar. He remains both obsessed with sex and impotent to act. This is highlighted by Díaz through his juxtaposition of Oscar with Ybón’s boyfriend, el capitán. Providing an extreme contrast with the obese, gentle, and dark-skinned Oscar, el capitán is “a skinny forty-something jabao [light-skinned man]

standing near his spotless red Jeep, dressed nice . . . One of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to” (*Oscar Wao* 294). Though not a *trujillista* due to his age, his aggressive masculinity, marked by the extreme violence and objectification of Ybón, reveal him as a disciple of *trujillista* masculinity and *el tíguere* persona; indeed, that he is given a title rather than a name indicates his embodiment as unchecked machismo.

Oscar pays the price of his pursuit of Ybón. He is taken by two of el capítan’s henchmen to the sugar cane fields and beaten nearly to death. Despite his pleas for mercy and attempts to escape, he is powerless to stop their assault. The aftermath of the beating represents a significant departure into a carnivalesque existence for Oscar in two distinct ways. Significantly, the descriptions of the beating and its aftermath focus on the placement of the blows, namely the head and the groin, areas of the body associated with grotesque realism: he is “smashed in the face” and “kicked...in the nuts” repeatedly until the beating ends when one of the henchman “jumped on his head” (299). Further, the description of the damage done by the beating is restricted entirely to his face: “Broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion” (301). Perhaps more importantly, the days following his beating are described as possessing a limbo-esque quality characterized by fantastic dreams and images which, in turn reveal, carnivalesque imagery. While not necessarily possessing the masks and costumes that have become the symbols of the carnival, they nevertheless create a heightened reality and more significantly, a liminal space characteristic of the carnival.

In one such dream, he is given the choice by a mongoose-like creature<sup>4</sup> if he wants to live or die. This choice becomes a seminal moment in Oscar's acceptance of carnivalesque machismo due to the liminal nature of this dream-state. The choice given is a moment of incompleteness, a moment between colonial imagination and decolonial re-creation. It represents the space for alternative to colonial logic characteristic of the carnivalesque. Moreover, it is a carnivalesque moment that symbolizes the death of the old Oscar and significantly, the possibility of rebirth. Gary Saul Morson indicates that death in the carnivalesque sense is not an end of life but a renewal. He argues that within the carnivalesque, the body is not "the mortal husk of an individual bound to suffering and articulated to an end" but rather "the collective great body of the people destined to continue through all change, all history" (93). Consequently, Oscar's symbolic death is a carnivalesque rebirth into the collective body of *la gente*, a rebirth marked by his choice to embody machista performance.

This connection to *la gente* is further indicated during the days of incoherency immediately following the beating. He dreams of an old man within a ruined courtyard wearing a mask. Again, the mask and the incompleteness of the ruined courtyard, the space between completion and absence, give this dream a carnivalesque quality. The old man holds a blank book for Oscar to read. Significantly, the blank pages provide a liminal opportunity that for Oscar has been his only space for projective re-creation of his world: the chance to write. Oscar's interpretation of the book represents his ultimate rebirth as Dominican; he recognizes it as an invitation to rewrite his family history in his own image free from the colonial imagination of the colonized. Within the pages of the book, he has all power to dictate and, more significantly, create his family history and thus his history. That the old man who presents him with the

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<sup>4</sup> Ramírez identifies the creature as a baká, a malevolent spirit that serves as an "otherworldly manifestation of historical trauma" (388-9).

opportunity for this projective re-creation is wearing a mask indicates an explicit connection between the carnivalesque nature of machismo and Oscar's rebirth. As such, machismo becomes both the mode of his oppression and initially, the means of his rebellion from colonial domination.

Oscar's decision to abandon his science fiction and fantasy novels in favor of his family history research reveals his decision to commit to his decolonial turn. No longer grasping for cultural acceptance and a sense of self within the colonial framework of US society, Oscar shifts his focus to the re-creation of his Dominicaness through a deeper connection with his own family and their culture. Returning to the Dominican Republic in pursuit of Ybón and history, Oscar cements his decolonial turn. Significantly, this turn is symbolically revealed by his weight loss; with it he sheds both doubt in who he is and consequently, his desires for colonial acceptance. In its place, he dons the performative machista mask. His final encounter with Yunior reveals the sense of self that comes through this shift in Oscar's approach to self-identification: "That last day on our couch he looked like a man at peace with himself. A little distracted but at peace. I would tell Lola that night that it was because he'd finally decided to live" (312).

This decision to live is Oscar's return to the Dominican Republic to pursue Ybón and research his family. Eventually his pursuit culminates in partial success: he sleeps with Ybón. But this victory though the culmination of a life-long pursuit of Dominican masculinity is short-lived. El capitán discovers Ybón's infidelity and has his henchmen kill Oscar. Oscar's death, however, rather than defeat, reveals Oscar's ultimate success in the carnivalesque sense: the creation of his own Dominicaness through his grounding in his familial heritage. Where his previous experience in the cane fields is marked by pleading and desperation, Oscar shows no

fear in the face of death. He delivers an impassioned justification of his actions in conversational Spanish. The significance of having someone like Oscar choose to speak Spanish is articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa who believes that “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- [we are our] language” (81). Oscar embraces the possibilities of his “otherness”, his identity outside of the colonial imagination. He dies a Dominican, having embraced his variation of the machismo expectations that result in his death.

The nature of machismo as both destroyer and liberator is further complicated by Yuniór. The character that ties Díaz’s three major works together, Yuniór is initially introduced as a seven-year-old living in the Dominican Republic with his mother and older brother, Rafa. Unlike Oscar, he is introduced as a largely shy child who follows his older brother around and has no sexual prowess. However, while Oscar drifts farther from the *el tiguere* ideal as he ages, Yuniór, following in the footsteps of his father and Rafa, adopts Dominican masculinity. His actions largely reflect those of Trujillo’s *tigueraje* performance. He conspicuously consumes women to redefine his worth outside of the colonial imagination as sexual prowess and ascribes this ideal to determine the worth of other Dominicans: “It’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (174).

Through these sexual conquests, the carnivalesque nature of his machismo performance is revealed. At its most fundamental element, the carnivalesque celebrates a “suspension and subversion of conventionally accepted hierarchies” (Gasta 179). Yuniór’s performative masculinity represents this affront to hierarchal institutions. His relationship with Veronica Hardrada, a white girl whom he calls Flaca, represents a subversion of the white/nonwhite binary. Though she resides in a similar socio-economic situation, the color of her skin makes her part of the colonial grouping. His treatment of her indicates his domination of her: their

relationship consists of sex. She cooks for Yuniór and his friends but never attains the status of girlfriend. She only comes around at his invitation, and he makes it clear that their relationship will never be serious. The power dynamic is entirely in his favor, characterized by his consumption of her and her own powerlessness. She eventually becomes “just some girl” from whom Yuniór moves on to consume another woman (*This is How* 88). This relationship is a symbolic representation of machismo’s carnivalesque power to flip colonialism in which the colonized—and racialized—people are dominated by the colonial imagination. By defining his Dominicanness according to *tigueraje* masculinity, Yuniór both creates a space for self outside of societal expectations of racial hierarchies and actively subverts them. Sexual conquest, therefore, is established as the way forward for Dominican men.

Yet herein lies the troubling implications of machista performance. While it provides Dominican men with a decolonial move that creates liminal space for self-creation, it simultaneously denies women that same creative determination. The unresolved work of Díaz’s writings—and especially *Oscar Wao*—is that his female characters are simultaneously colonized and victimized by Dominican men and as such, largely serve as little more than ciphers to enact fantasies and exert domination. There exists in his novels a conspicuous lack of consideration for the effects of the *tigueraje* persona on Dominican femininity from the feminine perspective. Díaz’s exploration of machismo as a rejection of colonial domination is therefore an incomplete decolonial study. He has often failed to move beyond machismo as a tactic for men to escape coloniality and acknowledge the cost, namely the victimized women used by men to achieve this escape.

Díaz’s most recent work, *This is How You Lose Her*, reveals a shift in his focus. Each of his previous books all identify and enact the victimization and absence of liberation for women

in Dominican's machismo-driven culture. However, *This is How You Lose Her*, though still male-centric and written from an entirely masculine perspective, begins to consider the cost of unrestrained, hegemonic machismo—the conspicuously consumed women left in its wake. Underlying Yunior's sexual bravado and conquests is a melancholy that undercuts the power provided by machista performance. The final short story within *This is How You Lose Her*, “The Cheater's Guide to Love,” chronicles Yunior's realization of the damage his infidelity has caused to his relationship and his ex-girlfriend. Initially claiming that he had “never hurt a woman in [his] life” (205), he is confronted with a book of emails and pictures from his cheating days:

You read the whole thing cover to cover... You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit it but it's true. You are astounded by the depths of your mendacity. When you finish the Book a second time you say the truth: You did the right thing, negra. (216)

While this maintains a masculine perspective of machismo and its insidious effects, it nevertheless reveals Díaz's attempts to confront the women left as collateral damage in the wake of the Dominican male's quest for decolonial identity. *This is How You Lose Her* shows a recognition of the cost to women of his characters' machismo. Díaz himself connects Yunior's inability to view women as human to his failure to fully come to a sense of self in a recent interview with Paula M. L. Moya: “Yunior's desire for communion with self and with other is finally undermined by his inability, his unwillingness, to see the women in his life as fully human.”

That machismo as a way forward comes at the cost of appropriating and mimicking colonial power dynamics serves as further indication of its problematic nature. To meet the requirements of machismo, Yunior must deny his nature—indicated by the sensitivity and

concern for his mother established within Díaz's short story "Fiesta, 1980" (*Drown* 23-43)—becoming what Dominican masculinity demanded. Further, it cements the sub-altern status of Dominican women. Thus, freedom from colonial imagination through machismo creates a separate machista imagination, a hegemonic hypermasculinity, which simultaneously—and contradictorily—rejects and perpetuates colonialism. The conspicuous consumption of women characteristic of Dominican sexual conquests becomes an appropriation of colonial domination; freedom from colonial domination in the machismo sense demands the sacrifice and colonization of women.

Yunior's shift from colonized to colonizer proves the ultimate failure of this machista performance. Indeed, his hyper-masculinity ultimately leaves him unhappy. Despite machismo's projective creativity that creates space for Dominicaness divorced from the oppressions of colonial imagination, it nevertheless represents a system that governs actions through masculine expectations. Yunior's hyper-sexuality, then, becomes a performative action that anaesthetizes him from the lack of true upward mobility within the US. Machismo thus ultimately serves for Yunior the role that nerd culture serves for Oscar: an ideological system whose promises of belonging prove unattainable. Horn identifies the conflict between the hegemonic oppression of Dominican masculinity and its implicit desirability as a method of evaluation of Dominicaness as a central struggle of *Oscar Wao*, a conflict easily discerned in the actions of Yunior. While she argues that this struggle stems from the interaction between "Dominican male scripts" of diasporic Dominicans and the "dominant American scripts of masculinity" (131), I believe she slightly minimizes the lasting influence of *trujillista* masculine norms. Though these are, of course, a partial appropriation of colonialist actions, they significantly represent a rejection of

coloniality. Nevertheless, this hegemonic oppression dictates hyper-sexual action that denies a liminal space for introspection in Yuniór.

Ultimately, the absence of liminality is the reason the machismo adopted by Yuniór, though possessed of carnivalesque qualities of hierarchal subversion and a grotesque realistic obsession with sexuality, fails to provide real freedom from colonial domination. Consider the conflicting ways in which Yuniór and Oscar represent Dominican masculinity. Yuniór is a Dominican man. He performs as one, meeting the expectations on the surface, while donning the machista mask to hide his fears and represent his willful rejection of coloniality. Although this machismo possesses the trappings of the carnivalesque, it rejects its essential characteristics: that of transition, incompleteness, and change. Instead, it is a hegemonic ideology that defines Yuniór through stagnation. Though this definition is of course largely decolonial in its position outside of the colonial imagination, it nevertheless trades one oppressive idea for an (admittedly) Dominican one.

Oscar's attempts to adopt *el tiguere* persona, though characterized by none of the apparent ease of Yuniór's adoption, reflect a desire for this same completeness. His constant assertions that he is Dominican in the face of skeptics denote the inherent hegemony of the idea of Dominicaness as perpetuated within Dominican culture. It is not until he experiences the carnivalesque atmosphere of Santo Domingo—a city defined by movement (denoting change) and more significantly, falls in love with a *sucia*, Ybón, that he adopts a transgressive and liminal machismo. This machismo rejects both the hegemony of Dominican Catholicism as exemplified by his grandmother, La Inca, and machista expectations as represented by el capítan. In pursuing Ybón, he rejects both the heteronormative institutions expected by religion and claimed by US culture and what Horn identifies as the scripts of hegemonic masculinity (128), a

particularly transgressive and dangerous overstepping of masculine prerogatives that Elena Vasquez identifies with the Dominican Republic's strong military culture (117-18). The bravado of this pursuit and flouting of hegemonic masculine expectations is characteristic of this new transgressive and moving machismo that comes to define Oscar's Dominicaness.

Significantly, Oscar's decision to research and record his family history becomes the symbol of Oscar's machista re-creation. The bravado characteristic of *tigueraje* masculinity and necessary to reject its hegemonic oppressions, ultimately spurs Oscar's transgressive pursuit of his history. In doing so, he embraces the liminality of his position; he rejects the colonial definition of his family and denies the control of Trujillo that would prevent him from re-creating his familial heritage. Rather, he embraces the space between histories and definitions, the incomplete and changing narrative which provides an anonymity that allows him to exercise "social power [in this case that of self and familial creation]...that are muted or suppressed outside this ritual sphere" (Scott 173). In doing so, he rejects the imagination of both colonial domination—the immigrant as inferior—and hegemonic machismo—*el tiguere* expectations—in favor of the projective power of decolonial space.

Oscar's death, then, represents something of a carnivalesque martyrdom as it identifies the limitations of hegemonic machismo. Though he ultimately adopts machista characteristics, his machismo is a carnivalesque masculinity characterized by incompleteness and the promise of change. This stands in stark contrast to the stagnation and controlling expectations of *trujillista* masculinity. Oscar as the representation of a liminal machismo—his masculinity is undefined by either colonial imagination or machista expectation—dies having finally reconciled his diasporic situation with the need for Dominican identity. Yuniór, meanwhile, lives behind a defensive machista mask having been denied by hegemonic machismo—the rigid expectations of *el*

*tiguere*—a sense of self. That Oscar dies is not merely an inevitability of his inability to fully embody *tigueraje* persona; it is a sacrificial moment that instigates Yuniór's—the character that has become in essence Díaz's Dominican everyman—eventual adoption of a liminal machismo that provides a space for projective re-creation of self.

That Oscar's death serves this function within the novel is evident by Yuniór's embracing of an incomplete machismo due to the memory of Oscar. Oscar appears in a dream holding the same blank book which he had interpreted as an invitation to rewrite his family history in his own image free from colonial imagination. Though Yuniór initially ignores the dream, he eventually undertakes the task Oscar had begun: to write the Cabral history. Ironically, in writing the tragedy of the Cabral family, Yuniór rewrites his own narrative, his own Dominicaness. He rejects the expectations of *trujillista* masculine performance and settles down with a wife whom he adores. He teaches writing at the community college and describes himself as a “new man, new man, new man” (*Oscar Wao* 326).

The difference between the “new man” of Yuniór's creation and his former machista dictated persona reveals the damage done by the hegemonic control of *el tiguere* performance. Having ruined his relationship with Lola, Oscar's older sister, due to his infidelity, Yuniór spirals into a pattern of self-destructive behavior that lasts for ten years. Significantly, his description of this time amounts to a single sentence where he simply states that he “went through more lousy shit than you could imagine,” though he indicates sexual promiscuity—“I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about”—and drug abuse—“my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood”—as characteristics of this period. Considering Yuniór's refusal to shy away from the explicit and violent experiences in both the Cabral family narrative and his own life, the absence of details for this period of his life is striking. While it can be argued that this is perhaps

an unwillingness on Yunior's part to either reveal his failings or revisit them, that is not consistent with the blunt personal assessments found throughout *Drown*, *Oscar Wao*, and *This is How You Lose Her*. Similarly, Yunior's constant interjections of his own experiences while writing the narrative of the Cabral family indicate that his reluctance has little to do with his unwillingness to interrupt or distract from Oscar's story.

Rather, Díaz's decision to skirt past Yunior's experiences represents a period of authorial impotency in Yunior's life. Considering that both Oscar and Yunior use writing as a liminal mode of projective self-identification to break free from the hegemonic influences in their lives, Yunior's failure to write suggests an impotency precipitated by *trujillista* machismo's performative expectations. Unable to attain a sense of self in the sexual conquest of "strange women," he falls into the perfunctory habit of *tigueraje* performance and becomes one of "[t]en million Trujillo's" (324). Significantly, Yunior's self re-creation and subsequent abandonment of *tigueraje* performance is symbolized by both Díaz's return to Yunior's narrative and Yunior's writing of the Cabral family history and as a professor of writing at a community college. No longer silenced by hegemonic machismo, Yunior finds voice in writing his narrative.

Yunior's re-creation of his identity provides a fascinating juxtaposition to Oscar's adoption of Dominican machismo. In each instance, the carnivalesque qualities of masculinity, namely the subversion of established hierarchies—in Oscar's case colonialism, in Yunior's hegemonic Dominican masculinity—begin to destabilize the ideological control of outside forces. Machismo, while oppressive and damaging, allows Oscar self-identification free from the domination of both Americanization and *trujillista* expectations because he embraces a liminal variation of Dominican masculine performance which provides a space for projective creation of identity. Yet, the oppressive restrictions of the *trujillista* machismo adhered to by Yunior denies

him this same self-identification because its stagnation is antithetical to the very liminal projectivity of Oscar's carnivalesque masculinity. He is bound by the very restrictions whose rejection and alteration allow Oscar to find grounding. This machismo, then, rather than being a complete avenue to self-identification exerts a pressure and control that mirrors colonial domination.

Yunior's imitation of Oscar's act of rebellious creation, namely, the introspective writing that identifies the colonial-esque hegemonic control of machismo, becomes the act of transition between the oppression of *tigueraje* masculinity and Oscar's liminal machismo. In the act of recording and reflecting, Yunior gives in to his carnivalesque characteristics: he subverts machista hierarchy by showing vulnerability, redefining—or changing—the machista mask as that of author and historian. In doing so, he re-creates his sense of Dominicaness in the image of familial rather than cultural expectations and relations. Yet, this re-creation is entirely dependent on the liminality of the carnivalesque moment. It is only in the interim after a recognition of the misery of hegemonic oppression, the realization and rejection of the complete machista Dominican, that he can identify an alternative, a changing identity. Significantly, this is the exact task undertaken by Oscar and partially achieved through his adoption of similarly liminal machismo performance. As such, it is a liminal machismo, rather than *trujillista* machismo that establishes this pattern of reclamation. Yunior's re-creation of his Dominicaness, therefore, is a process already common under the performative expectations of Dominican masculinity. In adopting a transitory Dominican machismo as an alternative logic to colonial imagination, he begins the carnivalesque pattern of reshaping identity against the domination of colonialism. His further rebellion against the hegemonic control of that same machismo is a continuation of that pattern.

## Conclusion

While not providing its redemption, the carnivalesque nature of machismo advances an avenue for the complication of machismo studies. Machismo, though a damaging subset of extreme patriarchal oppression, reveals a carnivalesque pattern of destabilization against colonial hierarchies and ideologies for Dominican men. It is this pattern of transition, of change and incompleteness that plants the seeds of decolonial imagination within machismo. However, its hegemonic characteristics as influenced by *trujillista* ideology and culturally enforced within the Dominican community if not altered ultimately lead to individual stagnation. Díaz seems to recognize *tigueraje* machismo as an ideology that is best used as a transgressive jumping off point for decolonial identification. Indeed, its rejection of colonial imagination marks the beginning of a re-created imagination that may, if cultivated, become the act of “social and cultural criticism” that leads to a staging ground of individual creation of new decolonized futurities (Hanna, Vargas, and Saldívar 8-9).

However, it must be noted that Oscar’s death suggests that the reality of these decolonized futurities come at a high—perhaps too high—cost. Though Oscar’s adoption of a liminal machismo initially leads to a projective power of self-determination, that self-determination becomes a fleeting reality destroyed by the violent embodiment of *trujillista* masculinity: el capitán. The carnivalesque nature of machismo, however empowering, is, therefore, an ephemeral phenomenon in Oscar’s life, one that momentarily frees him from the domination of the colonial imagination only to adopt and adapt the hegemonic control of colonialism to a more localized space.

As a response to colonial oppression, then, machismo’s initial rejection largely becomes an embodiment of the hegemonic attributes of colonialism. Despite providing Dominican men

with an avenue for projective creation of self through its carnivalesque liminality, machismo ultimately perpetuates the attributes of that which it fights: imperial colonization. Indeed, Díaz's writing reveals *tigueraje* machismo's toxicity as a shifting of coloniality's dominant and exploitative ideology—and physical—violence on to men who fail to meet machista expectation and even more severely, women. While this essay does not rehearse in full the terrible costs of machismo, the machismo described within Díaz's works is surely best understood as an attempted cure that is ultimately symptomatic of the extent to which the effects of insidious ideologies and political policies perpetuate themselves across time, space, and perhaps most significantly, cultures. The ways in which machismo transforms resistance into oppression has not been the exclusive focus of this analysis. Neither have Díaz's texts critiqued the high cost of machismo as explicitly as one might hope, though *This is How You Lose Her* indicates a burgeoning recognition of this cost and the damage done to Dominican women.

Of course, what Díaz does not always do, we as readers and critics should undertake. Indeed, Díaz's explicit consideration within his texts of machismo as a, if not the, dominant shaping force in Dominican masculine identity makes them amenable to a symptomatic reading of machismo, one that illuminates the link between colonial oppression, machista resistance, and the reproduction of oppression as hegemonic masculinity by way of attempted resistance. Significantly, it is not this hegemonic machismo itself, but its carnivalesque liminality as exemplified by Oscar's initial adoption of machista performance that provides a transgressive space for self-creation. Further scholarship is necessary to broaden understanding of how the carnivalesque nature of machismo may be considered and possibly utilized to create a healthier masculinity than that indicated within Díaz's novels. Absent this broader understanding, the

analysis of the carnival aspects of machismo under discussion here is necessarily incomplete—an incompleteness which future scholarship will surely supplement in important ways.

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