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## **Broken Men: The Failures of Machismo in Junot Diaz**

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In Junot Diaz's short story collection *Drown*, published in 1996, Yunior, a young Dominican boy visits the Dominican Republic (DR). Yunior and his brother, Rafa, venture into the social maze of their fatherland. Diaz focuses on the reckless attitude and dangerous activities the De Las Casas children partake in, which are heavily influenced by masculinity. Rafa attempts to swindle bus drivers, seduce women, and physically overpower a disfigured young boy. Rafa threatens to leave Yunior behind, not caring about his brother's abuse or hunger; his attitude mirrors the hyper-masculine view of machismo in Latino communities, with a focus on violence, sexuality, and superiority. Yunior on the other hand is a passive observer, and the DR won't allow him to leave the island unscathed. Yunior is sexually assaulted on the bus and he is hungry due to his brother's negligence. Diaz portrays two different types of masculinity, one that is shaped by macho culture and one that is not. Once the De Las Casas children move to the Northeastern United States, their masculinity is challenged. In *Reading Junot Diaz*, Christopher Gonzales asserts that "a masculine script motivates Yunior's world, and he must come to terms with it." (16). It is this masculine script driven by violence, pride, and promiscuity that establishes what being a Latino man is to Yunior, but the script has to be revised. Yunior's masculine script is not accepted in his new home.

Diaz dramatizes the effects of the masculine script in immigrant Latino families as a channel to criticize the effects of hyper-masculine culture on men and women. The DR is the touchstone of machismo for Yunior, and as such, his family. As the De Las Casas family moves to New Jersey, not only do they face difficulties adapting, but also the masculine script is dislocated. In Diaz's second short story collection *This is How You Lose Her*, published in 2012, Rafa struggles with his failing health, cancer taking a toll on his body; therefore he loses his physical strength, his ability to dominate women, everything that makes him a "man" in the

masculine script. Rafa's slow death functions as a symbol of machismo's instability. The process of Rafa's death is present in a number of chapters placing a focus on the gradual failures of macho culture across time. Yuniór's family is compromised from the beginning by the far reaching damage of machismo, with Rafa dying and Ramon, his father, leaving the family. Diaz's literature redefines hyper-masculine gender norms in order to show how men work towards dismantling toxic views on gender. Yuniór's struggle with his own masculinity serves as a model of what a character has to go through to overcome his problematic views on gender. In Diaz's work, masculinity in Latino culture is amplified, putting an emphasis on violence, adultery, and abuse on the male figures of Yuniór's life. As a result men see women as less than men, creating a divide between genders, facilitating toxic views in regards to gender and the family unit. Women react to the men's poisonous attitude with resistance in an attempt to make a difference. Through his female characters, Diaz depicts how women resist their social and cultural norms to obtain agency in their lives and perhaps repair toxic gender perceptions.

In this essay I interrogate the troubling effects of immigration on Diaz's model of machismo and how both men and women react as victims. The De Las Casas men react by trespassing upon women's space and annexing their agency. Female characters react by resisting the men's actions in discrete yet significant ways in and outside of the domestic sphere. Some of these acts of resistance are separation from abusive men and strides to establish a sense of independence, such as getting a job or learning English. It is within this resistance towards amplified macho culture that Diaz depicts change as possible for Latinos as immigrants in the United States. Because hyper-masculine histories infiltrate everyday life for Latino people in Diaz's work, I explore these interrelated short stories that illustrate the toxic effects of traditional

macho identity, offering a critique to the macho script that complicates the process of immigration for Latinos in a social and familial platform.

In order to explore the ways gender functions in these stories, machismo needs to be established in the context of Diaz's work and the DR. Alfredo Mirande, a Latino studies scholar, highlights the traits of exaggerated masculinity, authoritarianism, aggressiveness, and self-centeredness as some of the core traits of the hyper-masculine script (70). Exaggerated masculinity and aggressiveness are physical display of masculinity. While potentially harmless, an exaggerated value on strength allows for violence to become a possibility. Strength is used as a way to gauge masculinity in the patriarchal society of the DR. Authoritarianism and self-centeredness are more emotional traits of machismo. Through their authority, men are allowed to not see women as equals, harming the domestic sphere. John Riofrio, a Literature professor, describes machismo in Diaz's work as "a manliness that overpowers and in fact seems to spill over, an excess of masculinity" (24).. Machismo at its core is a culture that values masculinity to the point of idolizing it. As such, it plays a large role in the lives of immigrants.

Masculinity, like any other identity marker, of course does not exist in isolation. Although not the topic of this paper, it is important to honestly assess the complex relationship between racism and immigration. While I acknowledge the presence and importance of racism in Diaz's work, this essay focuses on the effects of racism on characters rather than racism itself. Through the first half of this paper I explore how immigration and race shape machismo, not as an apology for machismo, but as an explanation of its existence and why it is such a toxic element in the lives of Diaz's characters. Yuniór faces numerous situations when he is harassed due to being an outsider. Yuniór recalls how "white people pull up at traffic lights and scream at you with a hideous rage, like you nearly ran over their mothers. It's fucking scary," which makes

him feel both angry and unsafe (*Lose Her* 182). Yunior is understandably scared from the displays of racism that could lead to violence, especially when it is focused on his race, as it is implied by the drivers being white. Yunior's family's racial background is the reason he is verbally assaulted. Racism towards black people is prevalent in American society; the treatment of Latinos is already damaging, but it is amplified by the foreignness of Diaz's characters.

Yunior is not the only member of his family that is the target of racism. In "Negocios" kids insult Ramon, saying "Fuck all spiks!" while a medical student calls him a "nigger" (*Drown* 183).

These insults illustrate that racism is alive in multiple generations. Kids calling Ramon names emphasizes how racism is still being passed down in American families, perpetuating discrimination towards people of color as a whole. The medical student's comment doesn't just portray racism the way the children do, but it highlights that Americans in positions like doctors still discriminate people based on skin color and nationality.

Regardless of where in the United States, Diaz's characters face racism in a way that complicates their status as immigrants. Marta Cruz-Janzen, a multicultural education professor clarifies how "Latinos, especially those of Black heritage, are openly scorned and abused" (Cruz 61). The understanding of race's role in America is crucial to peer into Diaz's characters in a deeper level. The effects of racism create an outside pressure on Yunior's family, which exacerbates preexisting conflicts. Yunior is constantly aware of his blackness and its effects on his day to day life. In "Nilda," Yunior comments about how "none of us wanted to be niggers. Not for nothing" (*Lose Her* 39). Yunior rejects his own blackness because of a sense of self-hatred caused by the constant presence of racism in both the DR and New York. According to Yunior race is a prevalent issue in the DR and it is worsened in the United States. As a result, racism more easily targets black Latinos not just for their color or ethnicity, but because of their

status as immigrants. The issue of race only further muddles the identity of immigrants, exacerbating the role the masculine script plays for immigrants like Yuniór.

While confronting racism, immigrant Latino families in Diaz's work face the issue of separation of families. The process of immigration separates the De Las Casas family for nine years. Virta tells Ramon in letters about all the bad things happening, how Yuniór is anemic and how Rafa keeps injuring himself; she calls Ramon a "desgraciado, a puto of the highest order" (*Drown* 191). Virta's name calling emphasizes Ramon's infidelity and her lack of trust as a result. Yuniór's failing health serves to illustrate the consequences of poverty for those who are dependent on Ramon. The family unit is already dysfunctional before it is further destabilized by immigration. Ramon's absence allowed for his family to suffer and he doesn't seem to care due to it taking him nine years to bring his family to the United States. Because of Ramon's lack of concern Virta resents him as a husband and a father. It is because of this mistrust that the family keeps struggling to become stable, something that never happens. During Ramon's time away from his family, he stops writing letters at all for months on end, only receiving Virta's desperate letters. Virta writes to Ramon, "Please, please, mi querido husband, tell me what it is. How long did it take before your wife stopped mattering" (*Lose Her* 56). Virta's pleas to her husband are desperate due to her precarious position in the DR without her husband or a provider for the family. Without Ramon, Virta has been struggling to keep together her family for nine years. It is because of Virta's letters that Ramon is compelled to bring his family to the New York. The choice to say "dear" in Spanish makes While Ramon reunites with his family it doesn't last long, not because of Virta's lack of trying, but because of Ramon's lack of investment. The separation only matters to the Virta since she'll be the one struggling to keep her children safe and healthy, not Ramon. There is a disconnect between the value of family for men and women that Diaz tries

to critique in hopes to show the value of a solid family unit for other Latino immigrants. Diaz criticizes the struggles caused by the permanent separation of family as a result of the masculine script that breaks Yuniór's family apart.

Separation is a painful event for Yuniór, but so is the reunion. Coming back together as a family in a new country dislocates Yuniór from the only place he's ever known, making him fearful. In the short story "Invierno," Yuniór recalls his first day in the United States: "I was watching the snow sift over itself, terrified, and my brother was cracking his knuckles. This was our first day in the States. The world was frozen solid" (*Lose Her* 126). Yuniór's fear is not unique to him; relocation is a frightening experience for most immigrants when facing an inhospitable environment. Rafa on the other hand seems anxious to experience the unknown with reckless abandon, Diaz's portrayal of two kinds of developing masculinities foreshadows the different roles the masculine script plays out in the children's lives. Yuniór portrays the United States as an unwelcoming territory from the start. New York is nothing like Santo Domingo. Winter is a harsh unwelcoming season for the De Las Casas children and mother, keeping them isolated. Winter and immigrants are a common theme in Diaz's stories. In the story "Otravida, Otravez," the story takes place during winter, focusing on Ramon and Yasmin, Ramon's mistress. The cold is always present and linked with death. Gonzales proclaims that "Diaz invokes the traditional symbolism of winter's cold as representing death when Ramon speaks of a man's death" (91). Ramon talks about this man as a new immigrant looking for work, an honest pursuit. Ramon goes as far as to promise this unnamed man that "he wouldn't get cheated," but he has his life cut short (*Lose Her* 54). The masculine script encourages the unnamed man to take Ramon's proposal. The man's death acts as a warning, emphasizing that Latino immigrants face a harsh reality while trying to survive. This man's death represents the

failures of the masculine script; the script did not help this man adapt to Nueva York, nor did it help any of the De Las Casas men, starting with Ramon.

Diaz's characters choice to immigrate is motivated by the search for a better life, but Diaz's depictions of immigration function as criticism of the true motivation for immigration. This search is often unsuccessful as it can be seen in Ramon's experience as an immigrant. Ramon is the first to leave the DR in an attempt to build a better life for his family, but his wants are self-centered. Ramon "didn't dream about his family and wouldn't for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins... stacked high as sugar cane" (*Drown* 169). This is Ramon's first dream, not a tender one, but one fueled by a desire for wealth and power. Ramon places more value on material gain than the wellbeing of his family, an attitude that fits in the masculine script through its self-centered nature that is a core part of machismo.. Regardless of his ambitions, Ramon faces an uphill battle as an undocumented immigrant overstaying his visa. According to Kurt Organista, a professor of social welfare, "Whites [are] favored over same-age Latinos using similar resumes that [differ] only in indicating a different national origin" (53). Racism forces Ramon into more desperate situations, such as working twenty-hour days, seven-days-a-week in order to live in average conditions. As such, Ramon is forced to hold multiple low paying jobs to be able to save money. This aspect of racism forces Ramon to be frugal, going as far as sleeping on the floor with cockroaches. In a study of Dominican immigrants in the United States, Nancie Gonzalez states "male and female migrants [say] that jobs are sometimes even easier to find if one is here illegally" (41). Undocumented immigrants may have an easier time finding a job, like Ramon, but they run risks of deportation and abuse in return. Ramon is most likely underpaid while he is illegal and must be careful about who he works for. Ramon bends to the point of overexertion for his dream of wealth rather than one of reunion with



his family. Ylce Irrzarry, a Latino studies scholar, emphasizes that one of the core reasons for immigration from the DR is employment, not the idealization of the American Dream (92).

Ramon wants to establish himself in the United States not because of love for the country, but to survive. Ramon would rather be a poor immigrant in New York than poor in Santo Domingo. As a result, Ramon doesn't miss the DR because of his lack of concern for the people at home or the living conditions. Even so, Ramon's situation is worsened by his status as an undocumented immigrant. To secure himself in the United States, Ramon attempts to become legal and own a house, a symbol of success for immigrants.

The Dominican diaspora forces Diaz's characters to establish themselves in their new home as successful immigrants. The displacement forces immigrants to establish themselves through the toughness of machismo, such as Ramon. To many immigrants, owning a house is a crowning achievement that establishes success. There are many difficulties Diaz's characters face while trying to settle down. In "Otravida, Otravez," the narrator describes the houses during a home search as being "in terrible condition; they are homes for ghosts and for cockroaches and for us, los hispanos" (*Lose Her* 65). The house's status symbolizes how the United States treats Latino immigrants in a clear fashion; they are dehumanized by being compared to insects and barely considered living when associated with ghosts. These houses are not meant to sustain human life, yet Latinos are pushed to live in these houses. Yasmin acknowledges that nowhere else will accept Latinos, and even ratty houses prove to be a challenge to obtain. Once Ramon already owns the house, Yasmin talks about how other Latinos come to check the house, "some of them are couples as hopeful as we must have looked. Ramon slams the door on them, as if afraid... But when it's me I let them down softly" (*Lose Her* 74). Ramon's reaction towards other immigrants like him is to avoid them, as if they could steal his success. This fear might

seem at first glance irrational, but Ramon has worked diligently for what he has and can't allow anything to be taken from him. Yasmin can sympathize with the struggle of the visiting couple and wishes them good luck. Ramon's reaction is violent in nature and heavily guarded can be viewed as part of the self-centered nature of his masculine identity. Yasmin's calm reaction to other immigrants establishes an image of kindness in the Latino culture, which might foster more gentle home environments. Ramon may have ownership of his house, but the fear he displays establishes that owning a house does not provide the sense of safety that many immigrants strive for. His fear manifests as an outwards toughness that is cold and unsympathetic. In contrast, Yasmin is kind and comforting. It is within the different reactions of both genders that Diaz critiques the men. Ramon's fear can only create anger or fear in return, while Yasmin encourages fellow immigrants to not lose hope. These reactions are what makes change possible within the Latino immigrant community. Diaz emphasizes that the struggle that Yasmin and Ramon were facing with the house hunt is not an isolated incident. Other Latino immigrants are forced to look at the same houses. Diaz creates the picture of a cycle where immigrants are always struggling to find a home, much like Ramon and Yasmin. This cycle is not only perpetuated by discrimination immigrants face in America, but also the fear of other "successful" immigrants like Ramon.

Diaz establishes Ramon as a persistent character, unyielding when it comes to his pursuit to own a house. Ramon buys one of these ghost houses and fixes it, trying to pull himself up by the bootstraps. In an interview with David Hook, Diaz describes how immigrants "give up one world and go to another, [...] that leads to certain survival adaptations, which may look from the outside like admirable toughness, but people are really just surviving" (161). Diaz emphasizes the work immigrants have to put in to survive. Ramon's efforts to make a house suitable is an

attempt at rejecting the effects of racism on Latinos. Ramon's resistance reflects the toughness Diaz sees in immigrants and portrays it in a positive light while describing it plainly as a tool for survival, in this context, specifically for Ramon. The toughness masculine characters display is in part a side effect of the masculine script. Some aspects of hyper-masculinity can be potentially useful for men like Ramon, allowing him to afford a home and fixing it. It is because of the excess of effort that he makes meaningful changes. Ramon is able to succeed as an immigrant due to his persistence, yet that is not to disregard the negative aspects of the nature of excess found in Diaz's male characters. Ramon may appear as a resilient immigrant, but this is the perspective from an outsider. To Ramon, being "tough" is not a positive attribute, it is a method of adaptation that is required to fit in through an excess of masculinity that ultimately does more harm than good. Diaz is able to mirror these experiences in his characters due to the connection he has with Yuni6r. It is this toughness that allows Ramon to move upwards in society.

Diaz's characters are in a constant struggle to situate themselves as immigrants in the social hierarchies of the American Northeast. Immigration serves as a means to better the lives of immigrants, yet it rarely fully is. Irene Mata, a scholar of Latino Studies claims that "the message of upward social mobility through hard work is an integral part of the nation's myth of the American Dream," which is mirrored in Diaz's stories with Ramon's disappearance and the life the De Las Casas family leads without the father (40). The American Dream is little more than a concept, and even so, Ramon's status as an immigrant denies him access to the possibility of the ideal success. A happy family and economic stability is what Yuni6r wants for his family, but that is the opposite of what immigration has done. Due to Yuni6r's status as an immigrant he will always be "othered" in the mainstream culture, furthering the idea that the American Dream is

nothing more than a dream. Ramon is supposed to make a better life for his family and as such functions as an example of how the masculine script affects men as immigrants from the start. As a result, the men do the only thing they know how to do: act like the men they have been taught to be. According to Mata, “individuality and masculinity play important roles in the... becoming members of the nation” (43). Hyper-masculinity acts as a way for men to try to move upwards from their position as immigrants and outsiders. Regardless of this portrayal, Diaz’s characters still struggle to not be “othered,” but there is a reluctance to assimilate in part of Ramon and Virta, which preserves their identity as perpetual immigrants.

To fit into the United States, Diaz’s characters are expected to separate themselves from their status as immigrants by integrating into New York society. Neither Ramon nor Virta are able to integrate themselves due to gender and cultural identity, which as a result isolates and supports them in the United States. Irene Mata claims that the two possible outcomes for immigrants are “[achieving] a level of assimilation or acculturation, or completely reject the new world and live in self-imposed isolation,” fates immigrants have to choose between (Mata 43). Neither Ramon nor Virta are ever able to fit in, and as a result they find other Latinos to associate with to have a sense of community. Ramon also relies on other Latino men to make himself at home in the United States. The first interaction with another Latino man is a kind one, where a taxi driver charges him little for a half an hour cab ride, saying “whatever you save on me will help you later. I hope you do well” (*Drown* 168). Other Latinos can relate to Ramon’s struggle and aid him when possible, creating a sense of community. Ramon and Virta both chose to associate themselves with immigrants of their own gender who could relate to them in a more meaningful fashion. Within this choice to associate with their own gender, Diaz portrays the separation of men and women that is ever present in the lives of immigrants. This separation is caused by the dichotomy between

genders that the masculine script establishes between Diaz's male and female characters. Ramon himself tries to share some kindness with other immigrants. In his old apartment where he gets swindled he writes "ten cuidado, these people are worse than sharks," warning future newcomers to be on their guard (*Drown* 181). Those who robbed Ramon were also immigrants taking advantage of him in order to establish themselves as success stories through thievery. This kind of harsh environment requires the De Las Casas men to be strong and prepared, further enforcing the masculine script into the Latino immigrant narrative.

Latino women's relationships with each other help establish a sense of community and support that allows for women to succeed in Diaz's immigrant narrative. Virta "had her prayer group over to our apartment two, three times a day. The Four Horsefaces of the Apocalypse, I called them," exemplifying Virta's choice to isolate from the majority of the country (*Lose Her* 94). Virta's choice of friends are other Latinas, people who have gone through similar life experiences, as Latinas and as immigrants. Diaz's characters maintain a sense of camaraderie with people of the same country keeps immigrants from giving up. In "Otravida, Otravez," Yasmin arrives to the United States alone, with no family or friends to rely on. Yasmin meets Ana Iris, another Latino woman, who Yasmin would call sister. Yasmin says how "she was the one who took the first pictures that I mailed home, weak fotos of me grinning, well dress and uncertain," emphasizing the importance of this other feminine entity in her life (*Lose Her* 64). The importance of other Latino women like Ana Iris in Yasmin's life allow women to move forward as immigrants. Without the pictures, there is no evidence of Yasmin's success. Ana Iris taking the pictures validates Yasmin's experiences as an immigrant and brings them close together to the point of creating a bond as significant as family. Relationships between women are crucial in the hostile environment created by the masculine script.

There exists a large contrast between the genders in the DR that is emphasized by the portrayal of men and women in Diaz's stories. Maja Horn quotes Antonio de Moya, a Dominican psychologist that suggests that in Dominican society "Men are the exact opposite' of women, whatever any or both could be" qtd in Horn 11). The masculine script separates men and women in a harsh gender binary where there is no intersections; genders can't be brought together. The act of separation creates a larger rift between men and women, damaging the domestic sphere, and as a result, future generations, such as Yuniór's consistent cheating. It is because of this harsh dichotomy that genders are judged differently by Yuniór. In "The Cheater's Guide to Love" Yuniór keeps labeling women as good or bad. When talking about his meaningful girlfriends (which most seem to be of Latino heritage) they are divided into "sucias," dirty ones in English, or "good Dominican girls," there is no middle ground. Even with such a harsh dichotomy, there is no parallel that can be applied for men. While Yuniór may be called a "puto," a man whore, this is not considered a negative trait inherently by the masculine script. It is within this dichotomy that women are simplified to the point of being black and white characters while idolizing men regardless of their actions. Through this separation, Diaz critiques the split between genders that leads men to treat women as objects. Horn quotes Diaz who states that "the entire culture leads towards dehumanizing women in our imaginations," an attitude that is mirrored in Yuniór's portrayal of women in Diaz's work (qtd in Horn 135). In the same short story, Yuniór is told to get a new girlfriend with the saying "clavo saca clavo," which translates roughly to a nail drives out another, portraying women as no more than tools and remedies for men's use (*Lose Her* 185). Yuniór does take this approach and has sex with multiple women, trying to move past his most important relationship, but to no avail. The presence of a significant other can't easily be replaced with pleasure, and Yuniór comes to

realize that his actions are not helping his healing process. This kind of imagery of women is repeated through Diaz's work, whether it is dismissal or objectification, women are pushed aside by the masculine script that holds Dominican men in an iron grasp.

Violence and power are key elements of what defines Dominican men who adhere to the masculine script of machismo in Diaz's work. Physical strength and violence are key elements of masculine identity to the De Las Casas men. It is through physicality that men can exert dominance over other people. Ramon is portrayed as a hard worker and a boxer, Rafa as a tough baseball player, and Yunior does his share of exercise and delivers pool tables. Their physical prowess allows them to move forward in life one way or another, highlighting the importance of their strength. With that in mind, violence is easily associated with physical strength. Ramon beats his children and Rafa beats his girlfriends as a sign of dominance. In "The Pura Principle," Yunior retells having a lock thrown at his face. Yunior describes the event as follow: "Someone had thrown that lock at me. Someone who, when he was still playing baseball for our high school, had had his fastball clocked at ninety-three miles per hour" (*Lose Her* 120). Rafa has no problem beating his brother to exert dominance. Yunior's mention of the speed of Rafa's pitching emphasizes the kind of real damage the lock could have done, but Rafa is not worried about that possibility. Instead, Rafa tells Yunior he had it coming. Virgil Suarez, a Cuban Poet, retells his experiences with violence as a child. Suarez's father forced him to kill turtles for dinner, not caring about how Suarez felt about the turtles. Suarez recalls how "the idea of death had been inflicted upon me quickly... with the sacrifice of thirty jicoteas" (208). Violence is key to bring food to table, and that is the responsibility of the patriarch of the family. As such, violence needs to be implemented early, be it through killing turtles, abusing children, or beating women. Yunior faces this kind of violence between his father's beatings and through his

brother's abuse, engraining the role violence plays out for his dysfunctional family. Being the head of the family means violence and discomfort, and that is the role that men are meant to fulfill in the hyper-masculine script of macho culture.

Ramon's violence is an unusual kind of violence that leaves a long-lasting effect on his children. Yunion writes an essay for one of his classes as a child where he describes his father as a torturer. The choice of word "torturer" implies that Yunion feels like a prisoner when he is surrounded by his father; Yunion gets used to his position as a victim, which sets abuse as a common occurrence in the household. Ramon is perceived as a cruel man, not the father Yunion had envisioned. As a child, Yunion does not have the agency to brush off the abuse; this kind of torture involuntarily creates an image of what a Dominican man is. Yunion mentions how his dad "jammed his fingers into my cheek, a nice solid thrust. That was the way he was with his punishments: imaginative," establishing a pattern in Ramon's abuse towards his children (Drown 30). The imaginative nature of Ramon's punishment results in a form of excessive violence towards children. It is through this excess that Ramon's place within the masculine script is easily observable. This kind of abuse is a recurring issue for Yunion, traumatizing him over and over. Yunion, talks about his father's hands saying : "his fingers weren't gentle," revisiting the image of the father's hands (Drown 37). His hands are always making brash movements, not loving ones. There is no mention of Ramon ever hugging his children or being physically affectionate except his mistress. Ramon is selective with his affection to the point of depriving the people that need it the most in his family. In contrast, Virta kisses, hugs, and compliments Yunion. His mother is the only one that seems to provide affection in the family. She is trying to not let Yunion's father get to him; she can sympathize with her children and hence protect them from the kind of men she grew up with and married, or at least try.



Yunior's family is not portrayed as a tight knit group where members are able to rely on each other. The masculine script is not present in every family, allowing for families to flourish. Yunior's family doesn't fit into this description of a healthy family due to the hyper-masculine attitude that permeates the domestic sphere. Immigration proves to be one of the most defining traits of Yunior's broken family. Ramon's absence for nine years sets standards he has to meet when the family comes back together, but that is not the role Ramon fulfills. A young Yunior says "Papi didn't act the part of a husband" (Drown 186). Ramon's investment in the family seems superficial if he does not fulfill the part of a husband, and as a result, a father. The children expected a normal home with a benevolent father, but Ramon didn't fit the part. If Ramon doesn't play the part of a husband, how is he to play the part of a good father? Yunior describes his father during his absence, saying he "was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he'd left behind. He was pieces of my friends' fathers. I didn't know him at all," emphasizing Ramon's absence as hurtful (*Drown* 70). Ramon's comparison to smoke establishes how fleeting the image of a normal father is to Yunior, which allows for him to settle into the masculine script that Latino society fosters. Yunior's lack of father figures leaves him desperate for someone to fit the role, so all the other men in Yunior's life become all the more significant during his youth. It is due to Ramon's absence that the family suffers. Ramon's part as a father and husband is contrasted by Virta's part as a mother and wife. Not only does she act the part of a mother, but also a single mother for the majority of her children's life, Diaz portrays Virta as a symbol of women's resistance towards the masculine script.

Diaz highlights the negative effects of adultery in the Dominican family through his male characters' transgressions. First, adultery has a strong effects on the immigrant narrative that

Diaz presents to the reader. Natalie Friedman, a literature professor, explains how adultery destabilizes the concepts of “family life, patriarchal hierarchies, and fidelity,” establishing the effects of adultery in the De Las Casas family (Friedman 71). The effects on Diaz’s work start early, before Yunior turns four, with Ramon spending time with “la puta,” a prostitute who is never named. The lack of a name allows the reader to forget her and brush her off as a character with no importance, the same way that Ramon sees women, as tools to satisfy men. All of this information is retold by Yunior, who learned from his father. Ramon is not ashamed of his actions, even though does not inform his wife (*Drown* 174). The adultery does not stop, it continues even when Ramon brings his family to the United States. In “Fiesta” Yunior witnesses Ramon’s cheating first hand. By observing his father’s adultery, he realizes that this is a “potentially devastating event is actually normalized within his father's life” (Friedman 81). While Yunior is too young to understand what his father’s adultery is doing to his family, he knows that this is bad. On the other hand, Ramon’s actions create the image of a promiscuous Dominican man that adheres to the masculine script of machismo, and whether Yunior wants to be like his father or not, he is influenced by his father’s failures as a paternal figure.

In Diaz’s depiction of Dominican culture, men commonly dismiss women as a part of the masculine script. Through Ramon’s dismissal, he is able to ignore Virta. Part of men’s dismissals towards women is silencing them and belittling them. Virta makes a suggestion in regards to her son’s health, but Ramon “told her to shut up, what did she know about anything anyway,” explicitly silencing her opinion on, even when it comes town to her own child (*Drown* 35). Ramon wants Virta to believe he knows what is best for his children, children he had left behind for nine years. If anyone knows what the children need in the family, it is their mother, she has been taking care of them on her own since Ramon’s departure. Ramon’s arrogance allows him to

ignore Virta without a second thought. Silencing the concern of his wife only harms the children, making them believe their mother's opinion doesn't matter. This dismissal serves to perpetuate the idea that Virta is inferior to Ramon in the family unit, which as such encourages a dichotomy between genders where men and women are never seen as equal by men such as Ramon. Yuniors says "papi's voice was loud and argumentative; you didn't have to be anywhere near him to catch his drift. And Mami, you had to put cups to your ears to hear hers," creating a schism between the parents (*Drown* 33). Ramon does not implicitly silence Virta, but she is superseded by the patriarchal figure of the family. Ramon's voice reflects values of the masculine script, such as loudness as an excess of masculinity. While Virta might be difficult to hear, her voice is still heard, hinting at the power that Virta is able to hold on to regardless of Ramon's booming voice. Ramon further insults Virta's intelligence, claiming that "the average woman can't learn English," when Virta tries to practice her English with him (*Lose Her* 128). Virta is actively trying to better herself so she can somewhat fit into the United States, but Ramon insists that women can't do what men do. Ramon goes as far as calling her "average" in an attempt to discourage her from "wasting her time". Ramon's criticism does not only belittle Virta, but also it criticizes her position as an immigrant. If Virta can't speak English, then she can't fit into an English speaking country as a successful immigrant. Virta continues to resist by learning English regardless of anyone's criticism. Diaz's portrayal of Ramon as an antagonist establishes a connection between his actions and the masculine script that encourages behavior like Ramon's.

Women in Diaz's work establish a clear lines of resistance towards machismo, more so than the men. An example of a rather significant woman in Yuniors' life is Arlenny, Elvis' wife in "The Cheater's Guide To Love." Arlenny is rarely in any scene, yet she still offers Yuniors insight into his actions without breaking him down. When Yuniors starts getting wedding

invitations from his ex-sucias, Arlenny tells him “I guess it’s what Oates said: Revenge is living well, without you” (*Lose Her* 198). Yuniór doesn’t think or say anything at all in response, something that happens often when he is antagonized by other women. Arlenny is not turning either of the parties into villains, but she is trying to show Yuniór that he is in part to blame for the invitations. The invitations are a way of counteracting the male script by showing Yuniór that the ex-sucias are leading a good love life, something that Yuniór has never been able to achieve. This is not the only time Yuniór thinks Arlenny would do something for him. Once one of his pregnant ex-girlfriends comes to live with him, Yuniór says Arlenny “would march right in and boot her ass out one the street” (*Lose Her* 203). Arlenny cares for Yuniór and that is rarely acknowledged by him except at this point. Arlenny is a mother figure in the story, not just for her child, but for Yuniór too. Virta has cut off contact with Yuniór and he has no other women left in his life that care for him. At the end of the story, Yuniór goes to celebrate Arlenny’s Ph.D. defense, adding more to her as a character (*Lose Her* 217). Arlenny’s studies go unmentioned all throughout, even when Elvis is very involved with Yuniór; she remains in the background with her actions that now label her as an incredible immigrant success story. She is one of the few women of Yuniór’s generation that have succeeded in their struggle to move upwardly in society.

Virta’s role as a mother is to ensure her children’s wellbeing. Virta provides emotional support for Yuniór at any opportunity. She tries to mitigate what Ramon’s behavior is doing to her children the only way she knows how, by trying to be a loving and caring mother. Yuniór mentions how “[Mami] stood outside with me so I wouldn’t feel alone” while brushing his teeth, recognizing his mother is one of the few people who seem to care about him (*Drown* 30). Virta’s concern for Yuniór reflects the large role mothers have on their children’s development. It is

through Virta's influence that Yuniór may not follow the same path Ramon and Rafa have taken. Every interaction Yuniór has with his mother as a child is a gentle one, or at least one of concern. None of these traits are ever associated with any male character in the story, not even the children. It is the women who hold the family together. Virta is responsible for the family's stability. Women mean more to the wellbeing of a family than what a man like Ramon would ever want to admit. This juxtaposes Ramon's machismo and women's actual importance not just in a family, but in society as a whole.

Diaz's depiction of Virta as a woman in a Latino family is more nuanced by who she was in the DR and who she is in the United States. Diaz has two different portrayals of Virta: one before immigration and one after. Yuniór describes her saying: "she was no longer the same flaca who had arrived here three years before" (*Drown* 24). Yuniór's description is simple, but rather complicated. The choice of calling Virta "flaca" which means thin, emphasizes the change in her body which mirrors the emotional changes she makes through the process of immigration. Before leaving the DR Virta was portrayed as a happy woman, but she started changing as time passed after Ramon's departure until she finally immigrated; she is no longer the same woman. Virta starts off with a happy depiction by Yuniór. Yuniór finds a picture of her mother with her immigration papers and says "she sits straight and even in a crowd she stands out, smiling quietly like maybe she's the one everybody's celebrating" (*Drown* 41). Here Diaz portrays a proud and prominent woman. The thought that Virta might be the center of attention at a party portrays part of her time in the DR as positive. Virta is surrounded by family and friends she has known for all her life; she even goes as far as searching for other Latinas in the United States, as mentioned in a previous paragraph. Yet, the separation and immigration slowly shape Virta into a different kind of woman. Yasmin describes Virta's appearance as she sees her in pictures, saying

“she is small with enormous hips and has the grave seriousness of a woman who will be called doña before she’s forty” (*Lose Her* 69). Virta is changing as immigration becomes imminent. The description of short with big hips gives Virta a presence that is modified by the seriousness she conveys even in these images. Yasmin says Virta looks like she knows her age will show and people will notice, emphasizing the change. Yet the change finalizes once Virta finally arrives to the US. Yuniór describes Virta “she looked really nice that day. The United States had finally put some meat on her bones” (*Drown* 24). This change on Virta can be interpreted as a positive change to some extent, much like the toughness portrays. She looks healthier, with meat on her bones, but this was not a measure for her own benefit. Virta had to become tougher to survive as an immigrant, much like Ramon. This toughness is what allows women like Virta

Regardless of the women’s resistance, children aren’t protected from the cultural macho script that trickles down through other Latino masculine entities. Neither Yuniór nor Rafa escape the physical and emotional abuse from Ramon’s actions. According to Anna Loiterstein, a psychologist, the effects of the abuse can be “aggressive or coercive behavior, limited social skills and peer relation and...there is an increased likelihood that victims may later abuse` [others],” behaviors that both Rafa and Yuniór display (Loiterstein 101). Rafa is portrayed as an aggressive man that relies on abuse to obtain what he wants. Yuniór follows a similar trait of abuse but in a more emotional level through cheating. This is not to analyze the De Las Casas men, but to set a background where their actions can be connected to the masculine script. Rafa abuses other women physically and emotionally; Yuniór isn’t very different from his brother, sticking with emotional abuse through cheating. Young boys aren’t the only ones that suffer from abuse in a hyper-masculine environment. In the story “Nilda,” one of Rafa’s girlfriends is the focus of abuse from multiple male figures. Nilda is physically abused by Rafa and the rest of

macho Latino society, she “lost her bottom front teeth” after a street fight (*Lose Her* 40). Abuse is treated as normal in Latino communities, no one escapes it. The loss of Nilda’s teeth can represent a change in her voice after the abuse, demonstrating how it is difficult for Latinos to speak about the violence that they encounter regularly. Diaz expands the effects of abuse to critique the damaging effects of violence caused by the masculine script.

Women in Diaz’ stories play different roles that are nuanced by the complications caused by the masculine script. Yuniór’s girlfriends’ actions of breaking up are ultimately a way of breaking away from the damaging effects of adultery. In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” Yuniór contemplates his last broken relationship. After realizing all the harm he has caused to women he says “you were right” (*Lose Her* 216). Yuniór is able to recognize that his ex left him in order to not deal with the emotional effects of Yuniór’s cheating. It takes Yuniór five years of grieving to come to the realization that the masculine script causes harm to the people he is close with. It is at this moment when Yuniór starts writing and doesn’t feel like burning it; instead, Yuniór keeps working on his new project. Yuniór admits he “bends to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace, because you know in your lying cheater’s heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get” (*Lose Her* 217). The writing serves as a healing process after all these years of trying to find an answer to his heartache. It is due to his own hyper-masculinity that Yuniór pushes away the human connections he deeply wants. It is through the act of writing that Yuniór can find a solution to his problems caused by the excessive nature of the masculine script.

The immigrant experience of suffering sets into sharper relief the violent realities and pervasive threats to Latinos, but over time this change enables Yuniór to adapt. It is through the resistance of other Latinos that Yuniór is finally able to overcome his toxic views and start healing through his writing as well as rewriting the masculine script. Diaz’s portrayal of change

in Yunion serves to demonstrate how the resistance and actions of Latinos can potentially start chipping away from the long-lasting effects of machismo.



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