

Otherness of Oscar's Inauthentic Masculinity in the Dominican Machismo in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Introduction

During the autocracy of Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic became fertile soil for his brutal masculinity. While it was overt that the citizens were extremely afraid of the tyrant, people ostensibly and simultaneously had to behave themselves as if they were the pious advocates of Trujillo's regime. In the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Junot Díaz (1968-) not only describes the genealogical story of Oscar and his family, but also tells us of the continuing of the Trujillo dictatorship where Trujillo displayed his masculinity as almighty power. In this story, it is clear that the aftermath of Trujillo's autocratic masculinity is still a lingering value of Dominicans in terms of sexuality, which accepts machismo as the sole ideal form of Dominican masculinity. The protagonist Yunior delivers the severity of Trujillo's ruthless debasement of Dominicans to us, but his narrative form also seems to inherit the characteristic of the masculine machismo, which ruled the Dominican Republic in Trujillo's era.¹ Yunior's story-telling narrative tells us precisely that the machismo was the problem because it debased Oscar and his family as a superstitious form of the fukú.² However, he does manage to criticize Trujillo's regime by sacrifice of Oscar's unique nerdy figure as the other through his narration. As Pattenon refers to the dictator, Trujillo is to blame for cultural crime as well as political commitment because Trujillo "also subverted and erased their [Dominicans'] sense of identity," (6). While Trujillo disturbed the Dominican identity, Yunior seems to reconstruct the Dominican machismo in order for him to confirm his own identity as an authentic Dominican man. This paper attempts to analyse the Dominican sense of sexuality, which debases Oscar, because it reveals a dominant aspect of Dominican machismo that is capable of fixing one's identity in the community. Yunior seems to acquire his own identity as an authentic Dominican male through reproduction of the machismo by sacrifice of Oscar's nerdiness. Moreover, his narrative form renders Beli, who is a diasporic

¹ See Sáez, 543.

² In the beginning of the story, the narration explains what fukú is, and states that it is "generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World". See Díaz, 1-7.

Dominican female and Oscar's mother, an agent that embodies the remaining influence of Trujillo's machismo.

1. Yuniór's Masculine Narration and its Representation

1.1 Hall's Concept of Identity Politics

First of all, in order to analyse the identification process of how Yuniór represents himself as a subject in the Dominican community, let us recall Hall's concept of identity politics, a key notion of focusing on Oscar's nerdiness. In the discourse of identity and its politics, it seems to be insufficient to say that people's identities are monolithic. Procter explains Hall's challenge precisely: that he attempts to subvert "traditional identity politics" which has coexisted with the binary concept such as "black / white, straight / gay, male / female" (118-19). Whenever people identify themselves as cultural 'subjects' by recognition of any differences to others, it is synonymous with the reproduction of the excluded objects' otherness. Identification of both the cultural subject and object coexists with marginalization of cultural minorities in terms of race, sexuality, and gender.³ However, Hall insists on his argument that identities emerge from more complex structure, not from a monolithic stabilized characteristic:

I [Hall] use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. (5-6)

As his reference to "the meeting point" would appear to imply the mediation or negotiation with others, it is not necessarily synonymous with marginalization.⁴ Therefore, Hall's concept that "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference" (4) enables us to approve a diversity of identity because his notion has never depended on a binary concept. However, in this story, how Yuniór judges Oscar is problematic. The main character Oscar de Leon would appear to expose his nerd culture as the difference to machismo in Yuniór's masculine narration. Regarding Oscar's immature masculinity, Yuniór does not hesitate to pronounce his inadequateness for identification of the Dominican male on his nerd roommate:

I [Oscar] have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin. You [Yuniór] who have experience in these matters—do you think

³ See Procter in detail, 119.

⁴ See Procter, 121.

this is true?

I [Yunior] sat up. Dude [Oscar] was peering at me in the dark, dead serious.

O, it's against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once.

That, he [Oscar] sighed, is what worries me [Oscar]. (174)

In addition to this conversation between them, this novel is abundant in the descriptions which disapprove of Oscar as a Dominican man. For instance, his success for admission to a college does not restore Oscar's failed masculinity. The scene, rather, reinforces his inappropriateness as an authentic Dominican male.⁵ While those rejections of Oscar highlight the condition of what Dominican male must have done in order to be an authentic man, it simultaneously connotes the exclusive Dominican community that it employs the normalised machismo as a criterion of judging types of males inside the cultural sphere.

1.2 Authentic and Inauthentic Dominican Masculinity

Patteson refers to Yunior's manhood, which is based on only two types of Dominican masculinity. "In the novel, Yunior presents himself as almost the opposite of his awkward friend Oscar: fit, muscular, in every way the 'typical' Dominican male" (8). Through Yunior's narration, the cause of Oscar's failed Dominican masculinity seems to emerge from not only his overweight appearance but his adherence to the nerd culture.⁶ However, there is a difference between Oscar and his nerd friends Al and Miggs, who succeed in having intercourse with their girlfriends, although Oscar cannot see any essentialistic difference between them, especially appearance. They understand that the Dominican machismo does not accept fragility, and nerdiness cannot pass the gate. The difference is derived from the necessity of this epistemic conspiracy in the Dominican community and its machismo from Oscar's improper priority of nerd culture, which deprives Oscar of the opportunity to communicate with females. Although Yunior also displays his rich knowledge about the nerd culture in the footnotes of the novel, his behaviour obviously represents the epistemic conspiracy to adapt him, as well as Al and Miggs, to the machismo. He criticizes Oscar's attitude that, "if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't" (21). According to Sáez, a male's heterosexual articulation is one of the crucial attitudes in order to "belonging" to "both national and diasporic communities" (535). In Sáez's argument, his reference to the nation and diaspora is important because it leads us to discover Oscar's

⁵ Díaz, 49.

⁶ See Hanna, 515.

complex identities, which are constructed by not only the nerd culture, the Dominican community, but the forced exile of his mother, Beli. However, Yuniór's narration interrupts us for those explorations with the dichotomy which neglects to inquire about Oscar's diverse identity. Whenever Yuniór presents Oscar's uniqueness, his sole concern is not with Oscar's complex identity, but with his "oddity".⁷ Here, Yuniór's masculinity in the epistemic conspiracy with the Dominican machismo produces his subjectivity as an authentic Dominican male. However, it simultaneously reproduces Oscar's otherness. Bhabha's discussion on the oppressed otherness, which is constructed in the discourteous essentialistic manner, a cogent explanation:

The difference of the object of the discrimination is at once visible and natural – colour as the natural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural "identity". (102)

Although Bhabha refers to "skin colour" in this article, if he also presupposes that the ruling group acquires its subjectivity as a normal mainstream by the difference of the oppressed people as an abnormal, the replacement of "skin colour" to Oscar's fat appearance would be feasible because, for Yuniór, Oscar is an abnormal Dominican male. Instead of his failed masculinity in his "virginity", Yuniór labels him as an "inauthentic Dominican male".⁸ It is clear that Bhabha blames the dominant group for the essentialistic discrimination because its superficiality does not allow the possibility of exploring diversity of identity. Yuniór's narrative essentialism also uses this structure to concentrate on Oscar's presentation. That is, Yuniór's obstinate description disparaging Oscar's uniqueness, which consistently connects Oscar's body to the nerd culture, highlights and reinforces not only Yuniór's authenticity, but also Oscar's inappropriateness in the discourse of the Dominican machismo. Yuniór's narrative form thus reproduces the otherness of Oscar. In other words, although the Dominican sphere consistently debases Oscar throughout the story, his constant absorption in sub-cultures of TV animation and cartoon discloses the essentialistic aspect of the Dominican community and its machismo. However, Yuniór who mainly describes Oscar's behaviour in the public place is not merely one protagonist which highlights the nerd's inauthenticity. His mother Belicia also takes part in the reinforcement of Oscar's inauthentic masculinity in the private domestic sphere. Subsequently, therefore, the next section attempts to examine his diasporic root in order to explore the difference between traditional Dominican identity politics and Oscar's nerdiness.

⁷ See Patteson, 13.

⁸ See Sáez, 535.

2. Reproduction of Oscar's Otherness

2.1 Oscar's Diasporic Root and Route

It is clear that Abelard and Belicia derive Oscar's diasporic root and historical route from their genealogic stories. The reason of why Trujillo's outrageous notion of dictatorship was embodied in Dominica's regime was due to people's ambivalent submission. This led to citizens sacrificing their liberty, even though it was apparent that Trujillo was not in favor. For instance, Yuniór describes the ambivalence in the beginning of the tragic story of Abelard, who is Oscar's grandfather:

... Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country. Believed that all the toto in the DR was, literally, his. It's a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* Part of the price of living in Santo Domingo, one of the Island's best-known secrets. So common was the practice, so insatiable Trujillo's appetites, that there were plenty of men in the nation, *hombres de calidad y posición*, who, believe it or not, offered up their daughters *freely* to the Failed Cattle Thief. Abelard, to his credit, was not one of them; ... (217)

The problem of the Dominican Republic in Trujillo's autocracy was that the nation approved his loose machismo because it enabled him to not only exploit females' bodies in the sexual hierarchy, but embody his autocrat figure as "the representative of the Dominican nation".⁹ Abelard, who could not present his loyalty to the nation by rejection of sacrificing his wife and daughter, is therefore dehumanized. Even though his humanity was totally debased by "the famous doctor" (211) to "a vegetable" (251), his tragic death cannot remove the stigma of his being labelled a silly betrayer of Trujillo. It is explicitly synonymous with the betrayal to the nation, which guarantees docile Dominicans, who allow Trujillo's loose despotism, their survivals.

The fukú of the de Leon family thus seems to originate in Abelard's tragedy, and Beli subsequently inherits the curse from her father. It assigns disturbing life experiences of slavery and exile to her. After Yuniór's narration delivers her severe childhood to the readers that she was sold as an orphan, a black slave, who had not known her original root in the Dominican Republic, it reveals the horrible influence of the fukú which persistently deprives her of any stability through out her life. In her adolescence, she is forced into exile

⁹ See Hanna, 503.

to the United States because she commits the same fault as her father, who provokes Trujillo's antipathy.

2.2 Beli's Internalized Dominican Masculinity

Beli thus experiences both marginalization and diaspora. Hence, it is clear that the Dominican community as the nation excludes the de Leon family. Moreover, members of the de Leon family often expose their disgust of the country, and those descriptions seem to reinforce the opposite relationship between them. For instance, Oscar's sister Lola articulates her hatred for the Dominican Republic after the death of both her brother and mother that "Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. . . . she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (324). However, the opposition does not necessarily mean that the de Leon family abandons the Dominican culture in their immigrant community. Whenever she criticizes the inauthenticity of Oscar's nerd masculinity, she apparently discloses her own internalized notion of sexuality which is very same as Yunior's and Trujillo's senses. Beli, rather, seems to inherit the sense of Dominican masculinity. Regarding this internalized sexuality, Gilroy's statement, which is discussed in the reference of diaspora, seems to be crucial to analyse it:

. . . some of the most powerful components of what we experience as racial identity are regularly and frequently drawn from deeply held gender identities, particular ideas about sexuality and a dogged belief that experiencing the conflict between men and women at a special pitch is itself expressive of racial difference. This is not the only source of ideas about black subjectivity but it is often the most powerful one. (201-2)

Regarding the diasporic subjectivity of Beli, Gilroy insists upon its maintenance of the transcultural influence of sexuality in terms of black identity. When the diasporic subject attempts to adapt its instability to an unfamiliar world, their internalized sense of sexual and gender criteria seem to assign the sense of community to the new place. Even though her forced exile is almost synonymous with marginalization from Trujillo's Dominica, her exile to the Dominican-American community explicitly indicates her identity as Dominican. As she inherits a lot of domestic influences from La Inca, who knows Beli's veiled past experience as a slave, Beli's complex diasporic route cannot ignore those internalized Dominican senses of culture, value, and sexuality. Yunior's narration proves it because the genuine witness who sutures the genealogic experiences of the de Leon is not actually Yunior but Belicia. She seems to understand the difficulty of reconstruction of her past

Dominican culture in the United States.¹⁰ But it still obsesses her, and she therefore becomes an agency that articulates the cultural discourse of the Dominican masculinity in front of Oscar in the domestic sphere. The reason why she cannot approve Oscar's nerdiness is based on her different perspective for the Dominican history, and it defines her son's absorption in nerd culture as an inauthentic Dominican male.¹¹ Furthermore, Beli roughly connects this nerdiness to a monolithic notion of Dominican masculinity, moreover, to the otherness of femininity. Sáez states "Beli identifies unsentimental violence as the appropriate masculine response to frustrated heterosexual desire, in opposition to Oscar's tears. For the novel's Dominican men, crying feminizes and infantilizes Oscar's body, signifying inappropriate behaviour that is equated with homosexuality" (536). Here, it is no doubt that Oscar's unapproved masculinity is labelled as the other in the Dominican community. Yunior reinforces his authentic masculinity by Oscar's otherness, and Beli's categorization of Oscar as the other also embodies the epistemic violence of essentialism likewise. Finally, Grossberg explains this autocratic strategy of essentialism, which illogically creates Oscar's otherness:

Theories of otherness . . . assume that difference is itself an historically produced economy, imposed in modern structures of power, on the real. Difference as much as identity is an effect of power. While such theories obviously accept a weak notion of difference (a is not b or c or d), they do not see such differences as fundamentally constitutive. (94)

That is, when either Yunior or Beli produces Oscar's inauthenticity in terms of this "theories of otherness", the point seeks for other "weak notion of difference[s]" (94), and integrates them into a common point that Oscar is not a Dominican man. It highlights Oscar's other inauthentic performances as inappropriate. Consequently, both of them reproduce Oscar's inauthenticity and deny his identity as a Dominican male.

Conclusion

This paper's aim does not intend to reinforce the inauthentic masculinity of Oscar's nerdiness as well as Yunior and Beli do. As Oscar insists on his own identity that "But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy" (49), he enunciates his resistance to this epistemic conspiracy, which forces him to define his inauthentic masculinity, labelled as his sole identity. It is inevitable to reconsider Oscar's complex identity because, as Sáez points out, his inauthentic figure might embody an alternative Dominican identity which "represents a

¹⁰ See Mermann-Jozwiak, 14.

¹¹ See Kunza, 213-4.

diaspora that doesn't fit the established norm" (533). Moreover, the story's finale by Oscar's death after "embracing his Dominican identity" seems to provide more controversial room to discuss regarding the possibility of Oscar's diverse identity.¹² Even though he finally has sex with Ybon, it would not mean that he is also one of the Trujillos because he has never abandoned his nerd culture. His death with nerdiness might prove Oscar's alternative identity and its diversity rather than other Dominicans. However, in order to subvert Dominican essentialism, Oscar inevitably has to confront the epistemic conspiracy of Dominican machismo, which ostensibly seems to identify the authenticity of Dominican males. In this case, his labelled otherness would appear to be effective proof of his subversion of Dominican machismo.

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¹² See Mermann-Jozwiak, 13.

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