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Psychopathologies of the Island: Curses, Love and Trauma in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Junot Díaz's *This is How You Lose Her*

Stefania Ciocia
Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract

*The connection between national and personal traumas is a key concern in two Dominican-American short-story cycles, Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Junot Díaz's *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). Both texts link the inability to establish long-lasting romantic relationships to the violent collective past of the Dominican Republic, but they do so very differently. With its regressive chronological structure, Alvarez's narrative casts its characters as inescapable victims of a history destined to repeat itself. By contrast, Díaz eschews Alvarez's etiological quest, highlighting the question of personal responsibility. Only marginally successful in rejecting traditional models of national identity, the protagonist-narrator of *Lose Her* continues the reconceptualization of Dominicaness begun in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).*

Keywords: Dominican-American literature / Julia Alvarez / Junot Díaz / national codes of

Dominicanness / short-story cycles

The short-story cycle is a perfect vehicle to explore the connection between the individual and their wider community: by dint of its very structure, it emphasizes how each single piece fits into the overall narrative and adds to its cumulative significance. It also lends itself to conveying a strong sense of place, and of one's resultant feelings of belonging or alienation, as illustrated by canonical American texts such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). The genre's hybrid status—its organization looser than a novel, but tighter than a collection of short stories—occasionally leads to disagreements in the categorization of specific texts. Odd taxonomical wrangles aside, the short-story cycle has witnessed a renaissance in contemporary American fiction, especially at the hands of minority writers.¹ This essay is a comparative study of two acclaimed examples of the genre: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Junot Díaz's *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). With these and other texts, Alvarez and Díaz have put the Dominican

Republic on the global literary map. *García Girls*, Alvarez's first book-length foray into narrative fiction, is widely acknowledged as a classic of immigrant literature. *Lose Her* has confirmed Díaz as one of the most accomplished contemporary literary voices: a finalist for the National Book Award in 2012, the volume includes "Miss Lora", the winner of the Sunday Times short story prize in 2013.

In *García Girls* and *Lose Her* alike, there is a clear connection between national and personal traumas. Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship (1930–61) looms large over the two narratives, as do the colonial past of the island of Hispaniola, and the troubled relationship between the Dominican Republic and its westerly neighbor, Haiti. This harrowing history is identified by both Alvarez and Díaz as having profound repercussions on their main characters, even as they—much like their authors—are members of the Dominican diaspora. The García sisters and Yunion in *Lose Her* are plagued by an inability to establish stable romantic relationships, in what is presented as an obvious, painful legacy of their Dominican cultural roots. In spite of this similarity, Alvarez's and Díaz's respective "psychopathologies" of the island fundamentally diverge, not least because the texts give voice to two successive generations of Dominican-Americans: one that, reeling from the impact of a repressive regime, is still trying to come to terms with the burden of history, and a more recent one that can perhaps, tentatively, begin to move on, focusing on matters of personal, rather than communal, responsibility.

As readers acquainted with its reception will know, critics tend to consider *García Girls* a novel; indeed, Alvarez herself refers to it in these terms (Alvarez 1999 110, 190). That said, there are two correlated reasons which justify its inclusion in the short-story cycle tradition. On a structural level, its various tales are "linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the[ir] individuality [...] and the necessities of the larger unit" (15), in accordance with Forrest L. Ingram's seminal definition of the genre. Its history of composition also supports the short-story cycle approach, since eight out of the fifteen tales in the volume "had been previously published as independent works" (Nagel 153). Considering *García Girls* in this light draws attention to the formal properties that it shares with *Lose Her*, and to their respective hermeneutical implications. Alvarez and Díaz organize their material and control the flow of information in almost diametrically opposite ways. These choices affect our

interpretation of the two narratives and reflect their different investment in the act of storytelling as a tool for catharsis and/or sense-making.

With its allusion to linguistic assimilation, *García Girls* is a deliberately misleading title: the past tense suggests that the narrative will offer an account of its young protagonists' successful integration within a foreign environment. As it happens, the García girls are stranded between Dominican and American culture, and their hard-gained proficiency in English is no proof that they belong to the United States. The book is divided into three groups of five stories, and the stories themselves are arranged in reverse chronological order. Alvarez has explained that she “wanted the reader to be thinking like an immigrant, forever going back” (quoted in Wall 132) but, besides promoting an increased empathy with the migrant's state of mind, the regressive temporal arrangement means that readers know from the very beginning how the García girls have fared in their journey of assimilation. Another key feature in the sequence is the primacy over the other characters of Yolanda, the third of the four García sisters. Yolanda is the protagonist and/or narrator of the first and the final story in the cycle—a privilege that singles her out as epitomizing the salient traits in the collective experience of migration shared, and variously modulated, by the four sisters.² The fact that Yolanda's “development begins and ends the volume [creates] a regressive *Bildungsroman*” (Nagel 184), whose central concern is self-evidently not the coming-of-age of this particular figure, but a carefully-plotted excavation into the past in search of important clues about the girls' present predicament.³

“Antojos” is a good case in point of the preoccupation with providing transparent psychological motivations as well as rich allusions to the protagonist's socio-historical background: together, these details explain her eccentric behavior, and accentuate her sense of displacement. This introductory story sees Yolanda on her first visit to the D.R. after an absence of five years, nearly three decades since her relocation to the United States. Yolanda's estrangement from her native country manifests itself in a reluctance to speak her “halting Spanish” (7), and an awareness of the submissive body language of her extended family's uniformed staff. Her self-consciousness extends to her dealings with her perfectly

turned-out, brightly-dressed, glamorous cousins, who teasingly call her “Miss America” (4). They cause Yolanda “to see herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet” (3). The signature practicality of U.S. casualwear is reconfigured as the outfit of someone bent on misguided humanitarian work: “Like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go so as to do dubious good in the world” (3-4). Out of place against the luxuriant local vegetation, the sobriety of Yolanda’s attire contravenes Dominican fashion codes: on the island, grays and blacks are either markers of mourning, as exemplified by various aunts, or of being in service. Indeed, the family staff are so numerous and specialized as to require their own “color-coding”: black will do for the kitchen help, but not for the “phalanx of starched white uniforms” (3) of the nursemaids. Yolanda’s foreignness to her cousins’ privileged world is reiterated by her automatic association of their designer clothes and impeccable coiffures with the look of “call girls” (5); the suggestion of an overt, unruly sexuality heightens the implied celibacy of Yolanda as an earnest, self-effacing do-gooder.

Having established Yolanda’s alienation to the point that it almost feels overdetermined, Alvarez reveals that her character has traveled to the Dominican Republic in the “secret” (7) hope that she may settle permanently there: “Let this turn out to be my home” (11), she wishes. Yolanda’s disaffection for her adoptive country is spelled out: “she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never” (12). Nonetheless, the ill-advised, solitary adventure in the Dominican countryside at the heart of this story shows Yolanda up for the Americanized foreigner that she has become. In defiance to her relatives’ concern for a woman travelling on her own, Yolanda leaves the gated community which is home to de la Torres, her mother’s side of the family. Unlike the Garcías, whose convoluted lineage includes illegitimate children and multiple question marks, the de la Torres are members of the Dominican elite because they boast a direct ancestry back to the Conquistadores—a pedigree enriched by the “great-great-grandfather who married a Swedish girl” (see the paratextual family tree), adding precious white, North-European stock to the original Spanish line. Given the de la Torre’s wealth and privilege, their compound is patrolled by a “private guard [...] wear[ing] an army-type khaki uniform, a gun swung over his shoulder” (10). Yolanda sets off from this gilded cage, indifferent to the rumors that there are “guerrillas

in the mountains” (10). She also struggles “to believe the poverty the radio commentators keep talking about” (13), mesmerized by the abundance of tropical fruit stands, and by the inviting domestic quiet that she wilfully reads into the signs of secluded *campesino* dwellings out into the distance.

Yolanda’s rose-tinted view of her surroundings fails to register the incongruity of the occasional luxury complex, walled in concrete much like her family’s place: even the guard posted “beyond an iron grillwork grate” registers as an improbably attractive arabesque, “glimpsed through the flowering bars—a man locked in a strangely gorgeous prison” (14). The ominous connotations of this final image are lost on Yolanda. Later in the narrative, she does not hesitate to venture alone into a thick grove in pursuit of fresh guavas—the “antojos” (“craving”) of the title—until, as arbitrarily as it had come together, the idyll morphs into a nightmare. The “latticework of branches” reminds Yolanda of “the guard in his elaborate flowering prison,” while the “rustling trees of the guava trees echo the warnings of her old aunts: you will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed” (17). Yolanda becomes so terrified by her encounter with two local men as to be rendered momentarily paralyzed, and incapable of speech. Alvarez describes the scene with details suggestive of torture: Yolanda’s “legs seem suddenly to have been hammered into the ground” (19), “her tongue feels as if it has been stuffed in her mouth like a rag to keep her quiet” (19-20), while the two men carry machetes. These large knives are associated with the genocidal massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians, instigated by Trujillo in 1937—though, hanging from the belts of the two haggard men, they rather gesture to the hard reality of agricultural labor.⁴

Finally identified as an “*Americana*” (20) by the two workers, who have been addressing her in Spanish all along, Yolanda replies in English. It is only when she utters the word “Miranda,” the name of a notable family—in the area, that the men show any sign of (deferential) understanding and come to Yolanda’s rescue. They help with her flat tire and, embarrassed, refuse her offer of a tip—a faux pas grounded in the woman’s American habits. As the tension dissolves, Yolanda’s regained ability to walk is pointedly designated as the result of an act of deracination: “And as if dragging up roots, she has finally managed to yank them free of the soil they have clung to, she finds she can move her own feet toward the car” (21). After the men have retreated, the story ends with the frozen image of the model on a big

advertising poster for Palmolive soap, “her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance” (23). America itself is beckoning for the rootless Yolanda’s return; yet this call is not an unequivocal sign that she would be at home in the United States, especially given Alvarez’s emphasis on the “rich white” (23) of the model’s skin.⁵ An obvious counterpart to the local men’s dark complexion, this detail signals the opposition between the predominantly white U.S. and the predominantly black D.R. as the two alternative choices envisaged by Yolanda, in her yearning to make *one* of them her home. It is also a reminder of the mismatch between the Dominican national sense of racial identity, which is strongly Eurocentric, and how differently racial awareness is inflected in the United States.

Historically, for all that the overwhelming majority of its population is of mixed race, the Dominican Republic has privileged its Hispanic, white lineage at the expense of its African background, so much so that “black as a sociologically differentiated segment of the population does not exist in the Dominican imagination” (Torres-Saillant 1090). Among the reasons for this state of affairs is the Dominican Republic’s fraught relationship with Haiti, whose proximity and repeated attempts, in the mid-19th century, to unify the island of Hispaniola under its rule were fought back by a heightened Dominican nationalist ideology bent on differentiating as much as possible between the two countries. Preceded only by the United States in overturning the European colonial yoke on the “New World,” Haiti is the oldest black republic in the Americas: its African roots have constituted a key part of its national identity since the slave rebellion leading to the country’s independence from France in 1804. By contrast, very much as a reaction to its neighbor’s self-definition, the “nation-building process of the Dominican Republic expelled the African heritage from its ‘imagined community,’” so much so that, in a Dominican cultural context, “‘black’ is a racial category used to refer to Haitians who are constructed as ‘savage,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘lazy,’ and opportunist” (Grosfoguel 167). This “negrophobic definition of Dominicanity” (Torres-Saillant 1104) was perpetuated by Trujillo’s vehement anti-Haitianism. Irrespective of the historical causes and ideological motivations behind their national conceptualization of race, Dominican migrants to the U.S. typically undergo a radical change in the way in which they are made to think about their own racial identity: while within the confines of the D.R. they see themselves either as white, or as part of a

subtly nuanced, but not polarized, mixed-race continuum, Dominican migrants are usually reconfigured as black in the United States, where racial consciousness has a long history of being articulated in strict binary terms. Thus, going back to “Antojos”, Alvarez’s emphasis on the “dazzling” whiteness of the Palmolive model undercuts the suggestion that Yolanda will ever be at home in the States, even as the “creamy, blond woman” (14) on the poster calls to her: the lure of the cleansing, “refreshing shower”, with its attendant promise of “ecstasy” (14-5), is offered via a proxy with whom Yolanda cannot identify.

In subsequent stories, Alvarez provides several examples of the humiliations and racist taunts that the García girls suffer in the United States, where the family’s loss of wealth and social status compounds the discrimination they suffer for their perceived blackness. The eldest sister Carla is teased by her schoolmates not just for her accent (“Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!” 153) but because of her hairiness (“Monkey legs!” 153). The reference to primates as a racist slur affects Sandra too, the second eldest child who has inherited the Swedish great-grandmother’s genes (52); linked to the pressure of this white ideal of beauty, one of the symptoms of the mental collapse for which Sandi is hospitalized is the delusion that she is turning into a monkey (54 and ff.) and, consequently, losing her grip on language. The girls’ inability to speak, often configured in pathological terms, is a recurrent motif in the cycle, as shorthand for their deep-seated feelings of homelessness and victimhood. Whether these linguistic breakdowns occur in the U.S. or in the D.R., they are associated with the (real or perceived) threat of sexual violence. The Garcías are on the receiving end of unwanted advances, or outright sexual assaults, in at least a third of the tales in the cycle. In “The Rudy Elmenhurst Story”, the chronicle of an unsuccessful initiation to erotic pleasure, the college student Yolanda is turned off by her boyfriend’s graphic way of talking about sex; in “Trespass”, an exhibitionist approaches the adolescent Carla on the way back from school, an experience all the more traumatic because of the girl’s lack of words, in either language, to describe what she has seen. In the States, even the *pater familias* Carlos is the target of inappropriate attentions, and these, in turn, demand secrecy: in “Floor Show”, when Mrs Fanning kisses him in front of little Sandi, Papi issues an injunction of silence (“Not a word of this to your mother” 82).⁶ In “The Blood of the Conquistadores”, a visit to the García household from the Dominican secret police

reveals the “vague sexuality behind the violence” of Trujillo’s regime (211) so that the girls’ mother Laura turns to self-censorship as a survival strategy.⁷ “Still Life” instead revolves around Sandi’s encounter with the mad, naked, aroused Don José, working on a statue of the blond Virgin Mary. The vision of the elf-faced, chained artist straddling his creation is terrifying for Sandi: having “cried out to warn the woman beneath him,” the young girl freezes, “[her] mouth opened in a voiceless scream” (251). She will later discover that the man has given her face to his Madonna. Again, in these two examples, sexual intimidation and speechlessness are connected to the dictatorial establishment and the fear of a grotesque, racialized Other.

As a result of the clash between a traditional Catholic morality and the more permissive attitudes in the States, post-1960s, sexuality is further represented as a contested area of human experience, often policed and rife with dangers. In “A Regular Revolution”, the three elder sisters stage an intervention in the life of Sofía, who has reverted to old-fashioned gender roles after a prolonged stay in the D.R., and risks being trapped in an early marriage; years later, Sofía will incur her father’s disapproval for her unchaste relationship with her future husband. Alvarez’s treatment of sex as a taboo extends well beyond the exploration of religious beliefs and patriarchal customs: in “The Human Body”, the young Yolanda agrees to show her cousin Mundín her private parts in exchange for a coveted toy. The transaction happens in the coal shed close to the border between the de la Torre compound and the *palacio* of Trujillo’s daughter, an area where the children are forbidden to go. Its out-of-bounds location makes the shed an ideal place for small sexual transgressions: there the cousins find an adult magazine, which the gardener nervously promises to dispose of. When Yolanda and Mundín invoke their fear of next door’s *guardia*, in order to justify their presence in the shed to one of the grown-ups, the gardener corroborates their lie, compromised as he is by his own sexual indiscretion. The story closes on a further ominous note, with the toy model of the human body crushed to pieces, a reminder of the ever-present threat of the regime’s brutality which will eventually send the Garcías into exile.⁸

Under the strain of cultural and linguistic displacement, a condition aggravated by the early climate of fear in which they have been brought up, three of the four sisters eventually fall apart: the cycle

is pervaded with allusions to their mental breakdowns, their struggles to connect with their partners, and their need for therapy. The link between rootlessness, the collapse of language and the lurking menace of sexual violence is most evident in “Joe”, whose very title signals the disempowering concessions that the girls make in their attempts to fit into American culture; while Sandra/Sandi and Sofía/Fifi each have one nickname, Yolanda has several: “Yo, Yoyo, or, in the States, Joe” (see paratext).⁹ This “onomastic displacement” (Luis 847) is not burdensome *per se*, if one embraces the potential in inhabiting multiple identities. Nonetheless, while “Yo” (“I” in Spanish) conveys a sense of assertiveness, and “Yoyo” is a playful reference to the girl’s comings and goings between her two cultures (Barak 98; Halperin 180; Luis 847), the Americanized “Joe”—her husband John’s nickname of choice for her—represents a fundamental distortion of the original, as well as an obfuscation of its gender.¹⁰ In this story, a sustained meditation on the power of words, Yolanda realizes that her attitude to language is incompatible with John’s. Their interaction breaks down when Yolanda loses the ability to speak, floundering in unintelligible “babble” (78). His wife’s sessions with a psychiatrist later inspire John to give her the infelicitous nickname “Violet” (short for “*shrinking violet*”); Yolanda’s piqued pun—“Stop violeting [*sic*] me!” (74)—tinges John’s insensitive moniker with connotations of sexual assault. This feeling of defilement seizes Yolanda again when John tries to kiss her; from her distraught point of view, “He pried his tongue between her lips, pushing her words back in her throat” (75). In *García Girls*, Sofía is the only sister who has a successful first marriage, and children; as the youngest child, she has no early memory of the island and is therefore freer to shake off its legacy.

The nature of this Dominican legacy is exactly the line of inquiry we are made to pursue by the “systematic temporal regression [which] provides an exploration of causation rather than a drama of consequences. What becomes of these people is known from the beginning; why their lives unfold the way they do becomes the central issue, echoing the methodology of classical tragedy” (Nagel 145). Paired to the ample evidence that the girls are emotionally damaged, the reverse chronological arrangement sends us on an etiological quest, in search for the root cause of their ordeal.¹¹ The final story is particularly revealing on this score, as an account of Yolanda’s most haunting childhood memory, where

personal and collective traumas coalesce. In “The Drum”, Yoyo kidnaps, silences, ends up maiming—and very likely kills—a new-born kitten whom she has singled out from the litter because of her “four little white paws and a white spot between its ears” (281). She is “a curiosity” (281) since her fur is otherwise black. There is an unmistakable connection between the aptly-named Schwarz (“black” in German)¹² and Pila, the one-eyed, old Haitian laundry maid, with her “splashes of pinkish white all up and down her dark brown arms and legs. [...] She was a curiosity” too (279). Both Schwarz and Pila are at home in the coal shed, a location—as already seen—connected with sexual transgressions and with Trujillo. Yolanda’s memory of her cruelty against Schwarz thus stands for the collective guilt of the Dominican people for their ethnic violence against Haitians, and the attempted *blanqueamiento* (whitening) of their history, most brutally perpetrated under *el Jefe*’s orders. At the same time though, Yolanda and her sisters are also repeatedly portrayed as injured parties, exposed to the threat of physical and psychological violence. This continues to be true in “The Drum”, where Yolanda describes herself as a “curious child” (279) and a “curious woman” (290); a mark of her identification with Schwarz and Pila, the recurrent adjective has both an active and a passive meaning, as if to signal Yolanda’s ambivalent status between perpetrator and target of cruelty (by contrast, kitten and maid remain objects of the child’s inquisitiveness). According to Jennifer Bess, in *García Girls* Alvarez thematises “the Miranda Complex—the condition of occupying the seemingly contradictory roles of victims and heir simultaneously” (79), like Prospero’s daughter in *The Tempest* (neatly alluded to in “Antojos”).¹³ As indicated by the paratext, and by the title of story about the events that precipitate the Garcías’ exile, the girls are the inheritors of “The Blood of the Conquistadores”, legatees of a history of brutality that dates back to the arrival of the Europeans in the New World. Through her reverse chronological order, Alvarez foregrounds the migrant’s obsession with the past and the shock of cultural displacement, while also gradually exposing the long-standing repercussions of colonialism in the Americas and of Trujillo’s regime in the D.R.. These comprise endemic, and often ferociously aggressive, racism and sexism. The latter scourge, signposted in several observations about the everyday chauvinism of Dominican culture, is linked to Trujillo through the aura of sexual threat that surrounds him and his minions.

At the time of the publication of *García Girls*, the interplay between the colonial guilt of the Dominican elite with the traumas of displacement and sexual vulnerability—summed up in the Miranda complex—perhaps needed to be spelled out with the teleological structure adopted by Alvarez. However, this organizational principle also fosters a sense that history unfolds according to a strict determinism, and that the sins of the fathers will be visited on subsequent generations.¹⁴ The seemingly endless nature of this process is strengthened by the correspondence between the final image in the volume and the ending of “Antojos”: the black mother-cat’s “magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of [Yolanda’s] art” (290) recalls the inaccessible Palmolive woman (23). The woman’s mouth “opened in a wordless cry” (15) foreshadows both the displaced, terrorised girls’ inability to talk and the dispossessed black cat’s (and her motherless kitten’s) non-verbal wailing: the danger here is a disingenuous intimation that, with the exception of the privileged white model’s, the various wordless cries interspersed through the narrative are all equal links in a chain of hurt. Additionally, the wholesome, incongruous eroticism of the poster—repeated in the description of the new-born kitten’s mouth, “so pink and moist [...] it seemed impossible in a coal barrel” (281)—throws into relief, by contrast, the traumatic connotations of the sexual undercurrents in the text. With its frequent doublings and resonances, and its emphasis on the play of primal causes and inevitable consequences, *García Girls* ends up erasing fundamental differences and casting its characters as pawns in a loaded game: powerless individuals caught up in a much larger, often silenced history of sexual and colonial violence which is destined to repeat itself forever more, if we follow the circular logic of the text.¹⁵

Alvarez’s tragic denouement becomes the premise of Díaz’s *Lose Her*, which posits from the start as self-evident the link between the Caribbean colonial past, Trujillo’s dictatorship and national codes of Dominicanity predicated on hypermasculinity and on the disavowal of the African component of the island’s culture. Meanwhile, the allusion to loss in the title, instead of gesturing to a process of (communal) linguistic assimilation as in *García Girls*, foregrounds a private romantic failure. The protagonist/narrator throughout most of *Lose Her* is an old acquaintance: having made his debut in *Drown*

(1997), Yunior is also the chronicler of *Oscar Wao*, where Díaz paves the way for the outspoken, thought-provoking critique of Dominican machismo that is the main focus of *Lose Her*. *Oscar Wao* begins by unceremoniously pinpointing the root cause of all Dominican problems: in an idiosyncratic history lesson, Yunior tells us about fukú, “the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (1). Both the genocide of indigenous people and the Middle Passage are acknowledged straightaway as its sources (1), while an allusion to Columbus as both “midwife” and “one of its great European victims” (1) plants the idea that the sphere of influence of fukú extends to sexual matters: “the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic” (1). With the identification of Trujillo as “a hypeman of sorts, a high priest” (2) of fukú, Yunior completes his assessment of the reasons why, as he puts it, “we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (1). The existence of a curse implies a view of history even more deterministic, in its supernatural undertones, than the belief in the genetic legacy of the “blood of the conquistadores” that transpires in *García Girls*. Besides, Yunior is extraordinarily graphic about Trujillo’s rapacious sexual appetite: the dictator is infamous for “fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women” (2). Within two pages, then, predatory hypermasculinity is associated with colonial crimes; a few pages later still, in a pithy comment about Oscar, the same extreme code of masculinity is characterized as the litmus test of (male) Dominican identity: “dude never had much luck with the females (how very un-Dominican of him)” (11).¹⁶ Conversely, Yunior comes across as the stereotypical Dominican *tíguere* or “playboy hustler” (Ramírez 394): a compulsively unfaithful macho, forever prone to self-sabotaging relationships with women he cares about for the thrill of bedding the next girl.

Reading between the lines, however, in *Oscar Wao* Yunior begins to see through the “oppressive pressure of performative masculinity” (Ramírez 396) and to query its legitimacy as the measure of one’s adherence to national standards of male identity. An ostensibly staunch subscriber to this notion of Dominicanness, Yunior in fact elevates Oscar to the unlikely status of hero of the novel. Having failed to conform to the flawed, chauvinist national ideal of masculinity, Oscar is granted dignity and fulfilment, albeit short-lived, in his very resistance to this paradigm. Oscar’s loss of virginity takes place within a relationship marred by a very un-Dominican sentimentality: “what really got him was not the bam-bam-

bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated” (334), presumably because little intimacies have no place in the codification of machismo. Consider also the book’s final words, Oscar’s earnest summation of love’s sublime nature: “The beauty! The beauty!” (335). A reversal of Kurtz’s chilling cry against “the horror” of imperialism in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), they call for defiance to the systemic colonial and neo-colonial violence running through Dominican history. Oscar’s tender liaison with Ybón—a prostitute no less—entails rejecting the idea of sex as a commodity, and of women as objects, for an egalitarian bond, while the fact that he wins her over only after a relentless courtship—and a severe, humiliating beating ordered by Ybón’s military police boyfriend—proves that he is still an uncool kid “throwing himself kamikaze-style at the girls” (180). Oscar’s final immolation seals his metamorphosis, in the name of love, from “fatboy or dork” to “hero [and] avenger” (321). Of course, the one dimension where Oscar *is* a (belatedly) lamented hero is Yuniór’s shamelessly partial—and in places overtly fictional—narrative, which retrospectively turns this pariah from pathetic figure of fun into a self-respecting, gutsy young man. A self-confessed unreliable narrator at the best of times, Yuniór makes up the conclusion to Oscar’s story, tongue firmly in cheek.¹⁷ By inventing Oscar’s romance with Ybón or—who knows?—merely embellishing an infatuation with an improbable amorous consummation, Yuniór normalizes his friend to a degree. He imagines him capable of getting the girl, even if this demonstration of masculinity is tempered by Oscar’s sentimentality, and thus reconfigured as a small departure from orthodox Dominicanness. This allows Yuniór to celebrate Oscar as an atypical Dominican hero, and exposes his own reluctance to let go of the national code of machismo.¹⁸

If *Oscar Wao* obfuscates Yuniór’s complicity with *and* critique of hypermasculinity via a disingenuous narrative focus on several generations of Oscar’s family, in *Lose Her* Yuniór turns our attention directly onto himself. “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” sets the tone for the volume as a taxonomy of failed relationships, with a retrospective chronicle of the protracted end of Yuniór’s affair with Magda. After discovering his infidelity, Magda is persuaded by Yuniór to give him a second chance, and the two go ahead with a planned anniversary trip to the Dominican Republic. During this doomed holiday they

realize that their rapport has deteriorated irreversibly, though Yuniór remains in denial until the very end. In the process, the equation between Dominicanness and hypermasculinity is articulated *and* refuted. While Magda “considers [him] a typical Dominican man: a sucio, an asshole” (3), Yuniór rejects the blanket explanation for his unfaithfulness: “All of Magda’s friends say I cheated because I was Dominican, that all us Dominican men are dogs and can’t be trusted. I doubt that I can speak for all Dominican men but I doubt they can either. From my perspective it wasn’t genetics; there were reasons. Causalities” (18-9). These causalities are nothing more than Yuniór’s inability to resist temptation, but his hesitant defence of his fellow countrymen is vindicated by Magda herself; five months after their break-up, he gets news from her about “A very nice guy she’d met. Dominican, like me. *Except he loves me*, she wrote” (25). Being Dominican, then, is not an irrevocable death sentence when it comes to romance.

Still, the setting of the story allows Díaz to intertwine the unraveling of this liaison with Yuniór’s sharp observations about social and racial relationships in the D.R.. His attempt to win Magda back takes Yuniór to “The Resort That Shame Forgot” (13),

the largest wealthiest resort on the Island, which means it’s a goddamn fortress, walled away from everything else. [...] the only Island Dominicans you’re guaranteed to see are either caked up or changing your sheets. Let’s just say my abuelo has never been here, and neither has yours. This is where the Garcías and the Colóns come to relax after a long month of oppressing the masses. (14)

Magda’s restlessness during the mandatory visit to Yuniór’s abuelo, and her desire to move on to the luxurious Casa de Campo feel to Yuniór like a rejection of his whole country (15). The resort “has got beaches the way the rest of the Island has got problems [...] and there’s a massive melanin deficit in evidence” (15): this is a sanitized version of the D.R., pre-packaged for tourist consumption, where even the local “dark-assed” girls are on sale for the benefit of white “budget Foucaults” (15). Yuniór’s nostalgic declaration of love for Santo Domingo (9) coexists with a more acute denunciation of the

country's inequalities than what we see in *García Girls*, partly because both Díaz and his alter ego are economic migrants rather than political exiles from a privileged background, like Alvarez and Yolanda. In the end, Yuniór's reluctant epiphany about the hopelessness of his situation with Magda is full of bathos. In the Cave of the Jagua, the mythical "birthplace of our nation" (22), Yuniór has his personal vision and *cries*, incurring the disparagement of the two Dominican men who have accompanied him there. This is a sentimental Yuniór, like Oscar. It is also a self-pitying Yuniór, incapable of acknowledging culpability for his actions, too busy protesting his innocence: "I'm feeling sorry for myself, como un parigüayo sin suerte. I'm thinking over and over, I'm not a bad guy, I'm not a bad guy" (22). The word "parigüayo" ("party *watcher*") aligns him once more with Oscar, who elsewhere had provided the perfect embodiment of the term (Díaz 2009 19-20). At the same time, it alludes to Yuniór's eventual acceptance of the responsibility to bear *witness* to, and acknowledge his acquiescence with, the curse of hypermasculinity—an important point I will return to at the end of this essay. Further indications that Yuniór shares a deep similarity with Oscar recur in "Alma" where, speaking in the second person, Yuniór describes the titular character as "one of those Sonic Youth, comic-book-reading alternatinas without whom you might never have lost your virginity" (45). In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór's closet nerdiness had come across in his interest in sci-fi and fantasy; here its link with sexual inexperience is explicit, lending credibility to the interpretation that Yuniór's grotesquely hyperperformative machismo is an attempt to (over)compensate for his embarrassingly un-Dominican dorkiness and/or his past ineptitude as a *tíguere*.

In "Miss Lora", which chronologically, though not sequentially, precedes both "The Sun" and "Alma", we go back to a sixteen-year-old Yuniór and one of his earliest love triangles. On one side there is Yuniór's girlfriend Paloma, who "wouldn't give up the ass for any reason" (151); on the other Miss Lora, a high-school teacher living alone in the neighborhood. Although her physical appearance does not conform to Dominican standards of beauty—"skinny [...] no culo, no titties, como un palito" (149)—she had once caught the eye of Yuniór's elder brother Rafa, whose shameless womanizing had stopped only with his untimely death from leukaemia. Yuniór is clear-eyed in his portrayal of Rafa as an abusive, self-destructive misogynist and negative role-model; even so, he wonders to what extent his own

entanglement with Miss Lora is due to Rafa's influence (given the opportunity, his brother "would have run right over and put a rabo in [her]" 156). At this early stage in his life, Yuniór still clings to the idea that male promiscuity runs in the family: "Both your brother and your father were sucios. [...] Sucios of the worst kind and now it's official: you are one, too. You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were always kidding yourself. The blood always shows" (161). While his recurrent, apocalyptic nightmares are exacerbated by his guilty conscience, Yuniór justifies his duplicitousness towards Paloma with a convenient fatalism, similar in spirit to the narrative of the blood of the Conquistadores in *García Girls*. Despite his outrageous prevarications, the older Yuniór will become more ambivalent towards a genetic/cultural rationalization for his behaviour, until in the final, longest story in the cycle, he dismisses it altogether.

Reprising the apocalyptic undercurrent of "Miss Lora", in "The Cheater's Guide to Love" Yuniór records his spectacular disintegration following the break-up with an unnamed fiancée. A comprehensive catalogue of failures to get over this loss, the story reaches its narrative climax when Yuniór faces up to the incontrovertible evidence of his misdemeanours:

And finally, when you feel like you can do so without blowing into burning atoms, you open a folder you have kept hidden under your bed. The Doomsday Book. Copies of all the e-mails and fotos from the cheating days, the ones the ex found and compiled and mailed to you a month after she ended it. *Dear Yuniór, for your next book.* (212)

This is not the first time that Yuniór's indiscretions are exposed by written documents: in "Alma", there are his incriminating diaries, which he fails to pass off as "part of [his] novel" (48)—an outrageous act of dissembling followed by the punchy conclusion that gives the volume its title. In "The Sun", when Magda receives a letter from his other girl, Yuniór lacks the nerve to pull the "Total Fucking Denial" (4) required under the circumstances, but remains ostensibly convinced that his essential goodness, and his "stupid mistake" (6), deserve forgiveness. By contrast, in "Cheater's Guide" Yuniór

arrives at a turning point without sidestepping the realization to which it leads: “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. You did the right thing” (212). With this admission, Yuniór finally replaces disgraceful protestations of innocence with sympathy for the injured lover and unconditional acceptance of the consequences for his actions.

The climactic acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of this dimension of personal responsibility is one key element that differentiates *Lose Her* from *García Girls*. Díaz takes Dominican hypermasculinity as a starting-point, such an ingrained aspect of the national culture that its potential influence reaches to its diasporic communities. While showing that the national code of masculinity plays a big role in Yuniór’s inability to be a committed, faithful lover, and in his subsequent personal apocalypse, Díaz refuses to let his character off the hook, and takes him on a bumpy, individual journey to self-awareness. Yuniór’s psychological and physical disintegration, the subject of “Cheater’s Guide”, is a well-defined by-product of his misguided machismo, and not of his geographic displacement, as in the case of the *García Girls*. Alvarez’s heavy, initial emphasis on the connection between exile and emotional breakdown adds another factor for the readers’ consideration, and a convincing explanation for the girls’ romantic difficulties. However, the overarching teleological drive of the narrative ends up superseding this premise, in favor of the revelation that the primal cause of the Garcías’ trauma is the violent history of the island, and its conservative gender politics. Collective—rather than individual—crimes underscore this earlier Dominican-American short-story cycle. With her focus on bringing the past to light, Alvarez neglects to explore what may lie in store for the *García* girls, and what (if any) room for manoeuvre they have in order to shake off their burdensome ancestral legacy.¹⁹ The volume ends with a rapid temporal shift: Yolanda does take us back to the future (i.e. the narrative present), from the memory of the kitten, to the move to the United States, and her own development into “a woman of story ghosts and story devils” (290). Given this framework for Yolanda’s maturation into an artist—the last paragraph of “The Drum” is a miniature *Kunsterroman*—the act of writing itself comes across as an urgent recovery of stories, most of them infractions and abuses, that would otherwise go untold: “I began to write, the story of Pila, the

story of my Grandmother” (289). This retrieval is performed so as to assuage Yolanda’s cognizance of “some violation that lies at the center of [her] art” (290). Writing becomes a sense-making, possibly even cathartic, activity, but if Yolanda tries to exorcise her demons, Alvarez’s contextualization of the García Girls’ story provides a series of extenuating circumstances for their complicity with the Dominican colonial legacy. As novel Mirandas, they suffer from, as well as inflict, harm.²⁰

There are no such rationalizations and partial exonerations in *Lose Her*, which comes to a close with Yuniór setting down to write “the cheater’s guide to love” (212), inspired by his ex-fiancée’s quip. There is a strong intimation that the book about infidelity and its fallout is the one we have just finished reading, but this metafictional realization fails to yield any insight into Yuniór’s past behaviour other than what we have known all along: whether he is prevaricating or cowed, hanging on to the genetic/cultural explanation for his womanizing or capable of empathy for his exes, the pernicious constant in Yuniór’s life is the tyranny of compulsory hypermasculinity, identified as an essential component of male Dominican identity. Yuniór’s, and the readers’, knowledge of this state of affairs does not evolve in the course of the cycle. *Lose Her* is not about unearthing causes; especially if we regard it as authored by a chastised Yuniór, it is about consequences: a book of necessary testimony of the devastating effects of machismo, and the (self-inflicted) destruction it leaves in its wake. This testimonial quality is a sign that Díaz is keen to accentuate, not soften, individual responsibility and agency vis-à-vis the “curse” of the Caribbean: Yuniór’s cheater’s *guide*, and the whole volume as a chronicle of a heartache foretold, stand as cautionary tales, devoid of any cathartic or therapeutic value. By the same token, the cycle does not offer reassurance that Yuniór will mend his ways, and any hints of a future reformation are downplayed by the fragility and precariousness, one day at a time, of the writing effort:

The next day you look at the new pages. For once you don’t want to burn them or give up writing forever.

It’s a start, you say to the room.

That's about it. In the months that follow you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get. (213)

The reference to Yuniór's lying cheater's heart negates the redemptive happy ending, and adds to the sober, vacillating tone of these closing notes. This is in line with Díaz's wariness of any authorial pretensions to conclusive truths and objectivity, articulated most clearly in Yuniór's candid observation that writers and dictators have similar totalizing/totalitarian tendencies (Díaz 2009 97). The impossibility of extricating oneself fully from cultural values one is nonetheless trying to condemn is all the more palpable in *Lose Her*, where Oscar no longer provides a foil for Yuniór's own fraught Dominicaness. Díaz's scepticism about the likelihood of change, however, is qualitatively different from Alvarez's. While the determinism and focus on the past in *García Girls* foreclose the opportunity for individual agency, the discontinuous structure of *Lose Her* and its forward-looking ending are pitch perfect: they gesture to, and record, Yuniór's faltering character development, without trivializing or dismissing the burden of history. As in *Oscar Wao*, in *Lose Her* there is no talk of a silver bullet, no utopian suggestion for how to vanquish the poisonous legacy of the sexual and racial violence in Dominican culture. At most, both texts posit writing as a counterspell of sorts: a problematic, always partial and tentative (and therefore ultimately suspect) way to exercise individual agency. What matters to Díaz is that the existence of fukú be acknowledged, and its detrimental impact on Dominican people be recognized, without losing sight of the fact that even as they denounce its power, Dominican men like Yuniór (and Díaz himself) struggle under its influence. As Mahler has observed with reference to *Oscar Wao*, Díaz

proposes a contestatory form of writing that manifests its resistance through the unflinching exposition of how it reproduces the very structures of power it seeks to criticize. If victory is impossible in the anticolonial project of writing, then the transparent rendering of colonialist mechanisms of domination—even those operative

within the discourse of the self-avowed anticolonial subject—becomes the new ethical ideal (135).

This ethical ideal is what Díaz continues to pursue through Yunió's searing testimony in *Lose Her*—a confession whose rambling structure, profusion of damning evidence, and provisional conclusion, complete with metafictional twist, lack even the semblance of a quest for primal causes and justifications, let alone for absolution.

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- ¹ See, for example, Gloria Naylor, Sandra Cisneros, Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan, and Edwidge Danticat.
- ² Julie Barak sees the sisters as interchangeable characters (161). David Cowart instead argues that they “represent the red-shifting fragments of a single, once integral identity after the diasporic opposition” (51). In either case, the primacy accorded to the writer in the narrative hints at an investment in the (healing) power of storytelling.
- ³ Laura Halperin reminds us that, by contrast, early reviews read the text as a “narrative about a fulfilled American Dream” and “assimilation” (159).
- ⁴ The use of machetes was meant to disguise the anti-Haitian massacre as a peasant uprising (Suárez 131).
- ⁵ See also Cowart 46.
- ⁶ The Garcías are the silenced targets of these sexual threats in the U.S. because in their adopted country *they* are the vulnerable, racialized Others: Rudy thinks that Yolanda will be “hot-blooded, being Spanish and all” (98), Carla’s pubescent changes set her apart from her assaulter, whom she regards as part of “the vast undistinguishable group of American grownups” (156), and Mrs Fanning casts Carlos as a guide into the exotic world of the Spanish restaurant, even if only to translate the signs on the public restrooms. As Sandi notices, “around American women he was not himself. He rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant” (180).
- ⁷ This is encapsulated in the expression “No flies fly into a closed mouth” (209). The motto was “scratched on the lintel of the entrance of the SIM’s torture center at La Cuarenta” (Alvarez 1999 109; see also Wells Cantiello 88).
- ⁸ The heightened vulnerability to violence of female characters is signalled by subtle hints: the human body model is a “doll” (230), and the girls too “are just like dolls” (235). Elsewhere, they are “doll-girls” (213) or, in Sandi’s case, a “dolly on wheels” (241).
- ⁹ That “Carla” remains unchanged suggests a reverence due to the fact that the eldest girl is named after her father.
- ¹⁰ “Jo” would have been a more suitable alternative, especially considering its literary resonance: like Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-69), Yolanda is the creative writer, and the most prominent character, amongst the four sisters.
- ¹¹ On the strength of the quest for causation, see also Nagel’s remarks on the stories written by Alvarez specifically for this volume (159).
- ¹² Schwarz also recalls F.A.O. Schwarz, the toy store patronized by the family on their visits to New York, and indeed Yolanda thinks of it as a toy (“Can you play with a brand-new kitten,” she wonders, 284). It shares the same fate as other playthings in the hands of careless, panicked children: the human body doll is dropped by Mundín, while the “meowing ball” is thrown out of the window by Yolanda (288).
- ¹³ Bess celebrates *García Girls* for “undermining western History’s linear nature in order to reveal through Yolanda’s suffering and through her guilt, both the private and the universal cost of Prospero’s tyranny” (101). I emphasize instead Yolanda’s individual culpability, otherwise downplayed by the insistent coalescence of sexual and colonial crimes, and by the circular structure of the narrative suggestive of a fatalistic view of history.
- ¹⁴ Another unfortunate by-product of this structure is that Alvarez must wait until Part III, set in the Dominican Republic, to dwell on the unbalanced power relations between the Garcías and their servants, or other members of the lower classes. This late emphasis on the negative legacy of the blood of the conquistadores is a denouement of sorts.
- ¹⁵ Nagel comes to the same (implicit) conclusion when he writes of the text’s similarity with classical tragedy: in both cases, the fall of the hero/heroine is inexorable.
- ¹⁶ For Mahler, “Díaz traces a trajectory of hegemonic power structures, from colonialism to the *Trujillato* to the current era of neoliberalism, employing the persistent presence of the *fukú* to suggest that the Dominican Republic has never truly been liberated from the tyranny of colonial rule” (121).
- ¹⁷ See Yuniór’s slip in his reference to *The Matrix* (285), mentioned in Machado-Sáez (540).
- ¹⁸ Evidence that Yuniór’s contestation of Dominican masculinity is at best half-hearted is everywhere, particularly at the end of the novel where, although married, Yuniór is still playing the field. More to the point, the ending undermines Yuniór’s challenge to “the rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted” (244) as a credible national foundation myth. Having queried that the sexual conquest motif is behind the fall of the house of the Cabral, Yuniór resorts to this very same trope in accounting for Oscar’s death at the hands of el capitán; he does so regardless of the fleeting disclosure of Oscar’s “investigations, and the new book he was writing” (333).
- ¹⁹ Alvarez returns to the *García Girls* in *¡Yo!* (1997) to deal with the question of Yolanda’s agency and moral responsibility as a storyteller.
- ²⁰ Cowart casts Yolanda’s “mantle of creativity” as an “instrument of such deliverance as art can afford,” but predicates this need for salvation on the exile’s traumatic expulsion from “her own personal Eden,” which is then taken as a metaphor for our shared postlapsarian condition (54). My objection to such universalizing psychological readings is their disregard for the socio-historical context which implicates the Garcías in the perpetuation of the

cycle of oppression they are caught up in. Drawing attention to Scheherazade's influence on Yolanda, Halperin also traces a connection between storytelling and "salvation, gendered expression, and defiance" (179): the emphasis is, once more, on the protagonists as victims of gendered violence, and not on the girls' complicity with (neo)colonial power structures.